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The Years Without A Santa Claus

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Author Bio

Kathleen Flynn is a sophomore English major with a Writing Concentration. For the past two years, she has been involved in The Mercury and the Campus Activities Board. Currently, she's also started writing for The Gettysburgian and working for the Writing Center. When she gets tired of reading papers or workshopping, Kathleen enjoys reading everything from Richard Bunyan to Sabrina Jeffries. As a native New Yorker, she will someday return to the Empire State and live in a tiny apartment with a great view of Manhattan.

The Years Without A Santa Claus

It was second grade and I was still firmly entrenched in what my mom likes to call "La-La-Land." I still believed that the Tooth Fairy would pick up my newly lost teeth and pay for those dental pearls. I still believed that the Easter Bunny would hop into my house and leave behind a trail of pink plastic eggs in his wake.

And most of all, I believed in Santa Claus with all my heart.

It was easy to faithfully believe that Santa Claus actually inhabited the North Pole with his entourage of elves and reindeer. After all, countless movies and books confirmed his existence. My mom would read *The Polar Express* to us every year, and she even had a silver bell that looked as if it had escaped the pages of the book. I'd recite the lines along with Susan in *Miracle on 34th Street*, "I believe, I believe. It's silly, but I believe." I wanted to be like Charlie Calvin in *The Santa Clause*; I couldn't think of anything better than travelling to the North Pole and meeting elves or flying in a state of the art sled with its cookies and milk dispenser. Fox Family's *25 Days of Christmas* special alone convinced me that such a wonderful person as Santa actually existed.

It didn't help that my mother enabled my Christmas obsession. The minute anyone walked into my house, it was quickly apparent that my family was a tad overzealous when it came to the holiday spirit. Snowmen outnumbered people while numerous Christmas villages were established on windowsills and countertops. Our Christmas tree was barely constrained in its corner of the living room, its branches weighed down by numerous ornaments and lights. Every year, my siblings and I were given an ornament; one that my mom felt most represented each of us. She also made sure that we attended all the breakfasts with Santa every year and got our pictures taken with as many different Santas as possible. I wonder now why I never questioned how many different St. Nicks there were or even how Santa got any work done since he apparently spent most of his time sitting on a department store throne. My mom would also take us into New York City to look at the elaborate windows and the gorgeous tree in Rockefeller Centre. I inherited my love for everything related to Christmas from my mother, and she loved the joy that seemed to emanate from every fiber of my being in the holiday season.

The Christmas of second grade, I made the mistake of peering over the banister under the impression that this was the year I'd catch Santa at his work. I had so many questions to ask that I had heedlessly crept to the stairs and peered between the railing bars. At first, I was only slightly confused by what I saw. Why would my parents be placing presents on the couch, the same place where Santa always put my presents? Why was my father eating the sugar cookie I had specifically decorated with Santa in mind? It was as if something that had always been a part of me had been ruthlessly ripped out. Dazedly, I walked back to bed, not sure what had just happened. After that night, the world started to look different; it was less colorful with the potential for magic bleached out. I was now living in Dorothy's sepia-toned world.

The next morning, I pretended that it was simply a terrible dream, more like a nightmare. The doubts started to creep in, but I did my best to ignore them by throwing myself into the Christmas morning frenzy almost desperately. I looked around, collecting evidence of Santa's existence. There lay the remains of the half-eaten snowman cookie and the empty glass with the residue of milk coating its rim. My mother complained about how inconsiderate the reindeer were, and I could see the mashed up carrots littering the carpet.

I was convinced; yes, Kathleen, there is a Santa Claus.

I put that night out of my mind as best I could throughout the next year. It would be fair to say that I was in denial. I wanted to believe in Santa, so I put my stubbornness to work and willed Santa into existence. Every now and again, I'd slip up and refer to the Christmas gifts that I knew were hidden in the garage. I'd found them accidentally; it took several weeks before I was once again secure in my belief of jolly old St. Nicholas. I also had no one to confide in; I couldn't possibly share my doubts with my younger siblings. They still believed completely, and I swore that I wouldn't do anything to shake their faith. My mother saw my struggle with reality and knew something had to be done the next year. There was this bully in school named Allyson Laverty, and I was her favorite target. Allyson knew exactly what buttons to push in order to get under my skin. I was a socially awkward child, and Allyson was a master manipulator. I learned to keep my mouth shut and to stay out of her way as much as I could. I can remember standing by myself in the schoolyard, cut off from my friends since Allyson had decreed my alienation. My mother could sense that this girl didn't believe in Santa. She also knew that I was desperate to believe in him and that I would defend a non-existent person to the death. It was probably the one point on which I'd stand up to Allyson Laverty, and my mom didn't want to see me get hurt. She could sense that the playground would become an unpleasant place if I was allowed to continue believing in what wasn't real.

The day my suspicions were confirmed is crystal clear in my memory. I can remember my mother sitting at the computer, the screen filled with a toy website. Deep down, I knew that Santa was soon going to become just a figment of my imagination, forever out of my reach.

"Mommy, what are you doing?" I asked.

I can still hear her sigh; she took no joy in shattering my childish illusions, which had been so firmly cemented over the years. But she also knew that the doubts had started and she may even have suspected that I had stayed up past my bedtime to catch a glimpse of Old St. Nick. "Kathleen, I think you know what I'm doing," she said. "I'm looking at Christmas presents. Daddy and I are the ones who give you presents, not Santa."

And there it was: the confirmation of all my worst fears. Like anyone confronted with a harsh, unwanted reality, I ran from the room, still unwilling to believe the truth. I now realize that I subconsciously blamed my mother for shaking the foundation of one of my castles in the clouds. She was simply trying to protect me from the cruelties of certain children.

Being a bratty child myself, however, I made everyone pay for trying to wrest the rose-colored glasses from my eyes. No present could appease me. At the annual Christmas party at my father's firehouse, I threw a fit over the Penguin Pile-Up I received from the fake Santa. I knew my mother had picked it out, and I bitterly acknowledged that a mere mortal couldn't possibly be expected to know that I did not want the boring Penguin Pile-Up game. Santa would have known that I really wanted the Anastasia doll my sister had been given. I also hated the Twister game my mother had bought as my grandmother's present; again, Santa would have known better than to give me that.

It wasn't her fault, of course. She just happened to be the bearer of the worst possible news I could have received. Over the course of the next year, a few more illusions were obliterated. The Easter Bunny wasn't real and the Tooth Fairy became a relic of my imagination. I began to cling to other myths, ones in which parents and presents were in no way involved. I dove into fairy tales and resented living in New York, a place where the Little People would not inhabit. I walked into more than one wardrobe, waiting for the blast of cold air that would signal my arrival in Narnia. Glitter became pixie dust, and I wanted to find a pair of ruby slippers that would do the opposite of what they did for Dorothy and take me to Oz. Just in case I ever ran into a genie, I kept a list of three wishes

in the very front of my mind. After the Harry Potter frenzy, I waited every day for my owl. That continued for a few years since I was convinced that the owl had simply gotten lost while crossing the Atlantic. It was all too easy for me to convince myself that all of these imaginary things were real. The disappointment only hit harder when they faded away under the harsh light of reality.

As Christmas crept closer each year, I found it harder and harder to believe in the intangibles that I so longed to hold in my hands. The magic was gone; while I still enjoyed the holiday season, losing that sense of wonder and belief in the impossible really affected me. In a way, I'm still looking for something to believe in, something that everything scientific and factual cries out as wrong but that I will take on as faith. I never put Santa on the same level as God, but he was up there. Believing in fairies, elves, and even monsters under the bed merely emphasized that there were unknown entities in this world that I couldn't see. God and magic, faith and wonder, these were elements in my life that had once been so entwined and now had been jerked apart. Needless to say, this was an emotional growing pain that I resent to this day.

It hurt to grow up and find that the magic that once inhabited my world was an illusion; for me, it became all too easy to believe that there was no place in the adult world for enchantment. Over time, I've begun to sympathize with Wendy from Peter Pan; I don't think I would have been able to bear losing the ability to fly just because gray hair replaced brown or lines wrinkled once smooth skin. I never would have been content to simply give in to time and probably would have broken a leg trying to fly to Neverland.

I've become reconciled with reality as much as I dislike it. I've been able to regain some beliefs in unseen powers, but they are based on observation and adult values. I go to Mass each Sunday and believe the words I pray. However, I can no longer accept anything on face value the way I did as a child. There has to be some way for me to reassure myself that God does exist even if I can only see it in times of sorrow. Santa was the figure that I associated with excitement and joy as a child. My happiness alone was proof of his existence; today, I find that I rely all too much on seeing good in humans only during times of trouble. That is what reassures me of God's presence, a fact I find somewhat disheartening.

It took an event as horrific as September 11th for me to truly accept that there is a God. I can remember watching from the window of my seventh grade class as somber seas of firemen and policemen marched from my church. This sad procession of comrades made me hope with all my heart that there was a heaven where fallen heroes and innocent victims could go. I can remember my father coming home from funerals of his friends and praying that there was a peaceful afterlife for people I'd never met. After seventh grade, I stopped playacting at religion. God had a face now; I could finally see that the people who gave their time and love to those who needed it most were tangible intimations of a higher being. I also now know that a healthy dose of doubt is good for faith. My complete and unquestioned acceptance of Santa was perfectly normal for a child. As someone still in the process of growing up, I find that it is more important that I question what I am told. It is better that I find the answers myself and that I don't accept facts blindly.

The rose-colored glasses that were rudely taken from me were now crushed beyond repair. I had no choice but to view the bleak sides of life. However, I was also more attuned to acts of kindness and generosity since I was desperate to balance the ugliness I would see in headlines. My mother was a prime example of constant giving. I've learned from her that generosity is not limited to a specific season or holiday. Whenever someone needs her, she's there, waiting with open arms, open ears, and an open heart. And there are people just like her everywhere. If these people aren't proof that there is a more powerful being, then I'm misreading all the clues.

Christmas is still my favorite holiday, even though it has come to mean something

completely different for me. My mother has taught me the joy of giving and I've come to love the family traditions that have been established since Santa faded away. We still make sugar cookies even though no man in a red suit is going to eat them. We still get an ornament each year that perfectly matches our unique personalities. My mom still places my presents on the couch, and she does an amazing job every year, knowing instinctively what I want. I now see that she is in a way better than Santa when it comes to Christmas; she doesn't have an army of elves to help her. At the same time, I am almost disappointed with myself in that I sleep until ten o'clock on Christmas morning and have long since retired from obnoxiously waking my exhausted parents up at 5:30 in the morning. I have become a grown-up, as sad as I find that to be. It's not the same, but it probably shouldn't be. After all, I'm not the same child I was in third grade. Today, I live in a world that is in desperate need of happy endings and wishful thinking.

Although I've come to grips to the Santa-less reality, I'm still looking for something amazing, something magical to believe in. I honestly envy little children who still get to experience the breathless and sleepless wonder of Christmas Eve. This doesn't necessarily make me a crazy person, just one who wishes reality wasn't so obvious. I want my rose-colored glasses and pixie dust back. I want to fall down that rabbit hole back to a time and place where anything could happen simply because my imagination was in the driver's seat. If I could get my hands on a magic lamp, my one wish would be to erase the knowledge that Santa doesn't exist just for one Christmas. I can imagine the Buddy the Elf euphoria of knowing that Santa would be arriving any minute, and that excitement and impatience rolling around in my stomach.

Every year, I let my inner child out to play during the Christmas season. I know there's no such thing as Santa, but I can revel in the goodness that the season highlights in so many people. Even though it's apparent all year round, I love going to the toy store to pick out a present for the annual giving tree. I feel better about myself when I give a few coins to one of the Salvation Army Santas. Those people and my mother show me that you don't need a real snow white beard or velvet red suit to be a Santa for someone. I can't give any child a magic wand to solve all of her problems; I can give her that one doll or stuffed animal that will be her special friend as she grows up. I don't have ruby slippers or even ones made of glass, but I too have a shot at "happily ever after," just like so many other ordinary people.

There are nineteen ornaments that my mother has given me hanging on my Christmas tree. The majority of those ornaments are from the post-Santa years, and they mingle with the ones from when I still believed in him. There are Barbie, Disney, and book related ornaments that I can lay claim to, with very few deviations from the pattern over the years. I haven't changed much; deep in my heart of hearts, I hope I'll stumble upon a magic lamp or two. Somehow, however, I've discovered that ordinary magic isn't an oxymoron. There aren't many happy endings, but the ones that do exist aren't orchestrated by fairy godmothers. They come from people like my parents, people who give of themselves constantly in order to make their children see the best of the world. Javan once said, "Love can sometimes be magic, but magic can sometimes...just be an illusion." My parents have certainly taught me that magic comes from love; they aren't powerful wizards like Albus Dumbledore, but I've learned the same lessons as Harry Potter.

When I have kids of my own, I'll give them ornaments, too. Those pieces of glass and ceramic will be tangible touchstones for magic and family. While they won't grant wishes, they'll certainly remind those hypothetical children that someone will always love them. That's the most powerful and long-lasting magic of all.