

A Little FRUITCAKE

A Childhood in Holidays

DAVID VALDES GREENWOOD



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Da Capo Press

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Some of the elements of the chapter “Ambrosia” appeared in different form in the pages of the *Boston Phoenix*.

One name has been changed for the comfort of someone I love, at her suggestion.

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For my brother, Ignacio, who endured me

fruit•cake (froot • kak) *n.* 1. A heavy, spiced cake containing nuts and candied or dried fruits. 2. *Slang.* A crazy or an eccentric person: “*a fruitcake under the delusion that he was Saint Nicholas.*” (John Strahinich)
—from *The American Heritage Dictionary, Fourth Edition*

The Powder Keg Under the Tree

As I held the foil-wrapped shoebox in my hands, I could hardly breathe. I was five years old, possessed by a question of life-or-death importance: would my present cry or wouldn't it?

The package in my hands was the culmination of my life's work, or so it seemed in 1972. I had put in my request in November—not of that year, mind you, but a month before the *previous* Christmas. The fact that my request had already gone unfulfilled for one holiday is telling. Even at five, I knew that if the box in my hands contained what I dreamed of, then I had accomplished a feat even grander than talking my grandmother into letting me stay up late to watch *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

November 1971 marked the first holiday season since my mother had left my Cuban émigré father in Miami and returned home to rural Maine, where she'd been raised. After apartment life in Boston and then the Little Havana section of Miami, we found ourselves living in a real house like nothing my brother, Ignacio, and I had seen before.

Over two hundred years old, my grandparents' house was constructed in New England farmhouse colonial style: a shed attached to a building that housed the porch and kitchen, which was then attached to a two-story structure housing the bedrooms, dining room, and living room. It looked like many of the houses in Norridgewock, Maine, which is to say, like a fat white caterpillar whose segments were punctuated with doors and windows. There was an earthen cellar below, where Grammy kept all her canning, and a newspaper-lined attic over the shed that we used as a garage. We had two deep wells for water and an enormous garden outlining the backyard in an L-shape. About the only thing reminiscent of Miami was the clothesline strung from the shed to an ancient maple, the shirts and sheets flapping in the wind just as they had on the lines in Little Havana.

When Mom moved back into her parents' home with my older brother and me, she was forcibly returning Grammy and Grampy—both shoe shop workers on the brink of retirement—to a life they were sure they had left behind: child raising. But they managed to adapt with equanimity, turning the spare room into a bedroom for two boys and setting an elderly swing set on the once-unspoiled front lawn.

One of my earliest memories at Grammy's house is of that first Thanksgiving. All the grown-ups had gathered in the living room late in the afternoon, and "Uncle" Howard asked me what I wanted for Christmas. Uncle Howard was one of many not-really-related-to-us aunts and uncles in our lives. On Thanksgiving, with the few adult-sized chairs taken, he sat on an ottoman made by Sister Lee from church. This nifty footstool was really just three metal milk cans covered in colorful fabric and dressed up with pom-pom fringe, a very low post that put him much closer to my height than the other adults. I could look him in the eye as I answered eagerly: I wanted a baby doll.

Who knows where that came from? My playmates were all other boys. I can't picture taking anyone else's baby doll for a spin only to decide I needed one of my own. Maybe I saw a newborn baby somewhere, and thought, Surely there must be a plastic version out there for little boys like me.

It's a better bet that I saw a doll while watching television. Despite being devoutly religious, our family nonetheless watched a lot of television. The afternoons were a smorgasbord of what Grammy called "my stories." It is odd that soaps were so beloved by a woman who objected to her grandsons' seeing *Batman* reruns (too violent) and, a few years later, *Wonder Woman* (outfits too skimpy). Day in and day out, once Grammy finished her chores, she and Mom took up their stations in the living room juggling *Days of Our Lives*, *All My Children*, *One Life to Live*, *Edge of Night*, *Search for Tomorrow*, and *General Hospital*, a feat that required missing half an hour of one soap to catch the last half-hour of another. Perhaps sandwiched between the antics of evil Phoebe Cane or nice Nurse Jesse, I saw an ad for a baby doll.

All I know is that my desire was clear and my answer so primed that it burst out without hesitation silencing a roomful of grown-ups who had been enjoying the tryptophan stupor of their Thanksgiving feast. Did they laugh? Did they ask me if they had heard correctly? I remember a hiccup of silence and a vague awareness of some disapproval—not surprising since every person in that room went to our church. We were fundamentalists who (despite our obsession with television) eschewed a host of sinful activities from drinking to dancing to playing cards. The tenets of our faith most certainly did not include encouraging boys to play with dolls, but if anyone said so that afternoon, I don't recall it. My clearest impression is of having made my request.

As far as I knew, it was a done deal. I didn't doubt for a second that I would get a doll that Christmas because, from the moment my brother and I had come home to Maine from Miami, relatives and friends had fawned over us as if we had just splashed down safely after a mission to the moon. In my innocence, I believed that only a matter of weeks stood between me and the baby doll of my dreams.

I was mistaken in this regard. My brother and I each got the exact same five gifts: a blow-up octopus, the powdery smell of which still lingers in my memory; a metal train; a plastic snowmobile; a helicopter; and a mechanical dog that barked. In a photo of that Christmas, Ignacio and I sit on my bed, side by side, with our matching bowl cuts and new toys gathered around us. There is no doll.

Had I known then that this would be one of my family's most flush holidays, and thus this trove of gifts was the grandest it would ever be, I probably would have appreciated my new toys more. True, I enjoyed them well enough, considering that they were merely diverting second-choice gifts. I especially liked the dog, which I played with so often that it eventually began to lose its battery-operated bark, emitting only a slurred mewling noise. But a dog was no doll—and this was a problem.

I dug in. That March, when my fifth birthday—St. Patrick's Day—approached, I announced to anyone who would listen that I wanted a baby doll. Instead, I got a green cake and a toy truck, which eyed suspiciously. When my mother's birthday came around in July, I asked her what she wanted, though only as a pretense to tell her that if I were in her shoes, *I'd* want a doll.

One late summer afternoon, after an excursion to Frederick's Dar-I-Whip, I sat in the backseat of my mother's 1969 AMC Rebel, sucking down a milkshake and only half listening to her conversation with a friend sitting in the passenger seat. My ears started to burn when I heard the friend say, "So give him the doll."

I'd missed whatever my mother had said first, but I wanted to jump up and down as the friend continued. "It's the seventies. Lots of boys play with dolls now. It's not going to make him—" And here she trailed off, only belatedly considering the little pitcher with big ears. I saw her looking in the rearview mirror, and she saw me seeing, then dutifully told my mother that I might have caught the gist of this exchange. My mother muttered, "Shoot," with the resignation of one who knows she is up against the stubborn will of a child with a one-track mind.

I wasn't all that concerned with the words left unspoken by my mother's friend. Whatever a doll would or wouldn't make me, I cared only that someone had registered a vote for my wish. Now my

countdown to days of glorious pretend burping and feeding could begin in true earnest.

Grammy, it turns out, was less keen on this progressive “go with the times” logic and had said so. But Mom went ahead that December and bought a baby doll anyway, then waited until the last minute to admit it. Ever a woman unafraid of expressing her very firm opinions, Grammy was furious. Her anger was not something to be taken lightly. Though just a few inches over five feet, she was a large woman in those days, her body thick and almost squared off, like a Russian farmworker in a textbook. This was in the years of roller curls, before perms became the fashion, and her hair—a white halo as fixed and unmovable as she was—simply added to the effect of her power. Her eyes, a nonthreatening gray-blue most of the time, seemed to darken visibly when she was mad, narrowing into glittering slits of anger, as they must have at my mother’s pronouncement.

How could my mother possibly pull such a stunt right under her nose? How could Mom just ignore Grammy’s values while yet basking in the glow of her charity? What did she want her son to become for heaven’s sake?

I overheard this exchange from my perch at the top of the living room stairs. Our house had its share of quirky details. The stairs to the unheated upper bedrooms were attached to one wall of the living room, built with no divider and only much later hemmed in by a wooden railing to keep family members from plummeting parlorward. The couch with the best view of the television was backed up against these stairs, so that if its occupants were sufficiently engrossed in their program, a little boy could huddle on the top step unseen when he was supposed to be asleep in bed. Bracing myself against the wall like someone trying not to fall off a ledge, I watched many programs I wasn’t supposed to. After months of practice, I could be deathly quiet and hold this pose for a good half-hour without tumbling into view.

The *Sonny & Cher* show was on that night. Let me count the ways I loved Cher. I loved her hair, which was shinier than any I’d ever seen, even our neighbor Barbie’s, whose hair was pretty good by the standards of the real world. I also loved Cher’s laugh, which was husky and deep, like a smoker’s (but without the yellow teeth). I loved how she got all the good lines, and Sonny just had to stand there hiding behind his mustache. Considering that their show never aired before my bedtime, I shouldn’t have even known Cher existed, but my grandfather loved variety shows and had made *Sonny & Cher* fixture on his viewing schedule. I had the top step all to myself when Grammy found out what I was getting for Christmas—and erupted.

My mother’s defense was weak ideologically and grand strategically: the present was already wrapped.

Grammy was not impressed. “I guess I can just about figure out how to solve that!”

But my mom persevered. “He’s already seen it. What if he’s picked it up? What if we switch it, and he knows?”

What if, indeed. I *had* picked it up, and I *would* know if they switched it. Just a few nights before, while Mom was out of the house and Grammy was cooking dinner, I had waited until Grampy was “resting his eyes” during the evening news, then crept over to the tree. There were four or so gifts with my name on them, one of them so soft it couldn’t be my baby, and another, too small. I knew that one of the remaining boxes was from Miami, where my father lived, and let me be clear: there was no way a Cuban *papi* in 1972 was giving his son a doll. That left a present the shape and size of a shoebox.

When I picked up the box for examination, it made a little sound: a half-cry, cut short when I dropped the box, sure that the noise would rouse Grampy. I backed away from the tree as fast as I could, exultant in my discovery. Not only had they gotten me a baby doll, but they’d gotten one that cried. The luxury!

I was understandably horrified, then, to discover that this might not actually be the present I was to receive. If Grammy put her foot down, seeing as she was the ultimate grown-up among grown-ups,

able to make all manner of relatives bend to her will, who knew what I might find in that box come Christmas morning. A ball? Another truck? A squirt gun? ~~Sonny & Cher~~ was no consolation that night as I realized my dilemma: little boys who aren't supposed to know what they're getting for Christmas can't exactly protest the unfairness of not getting something they haven't yet *not* gotten.

What was the big deal? This question plagued me in the days leading up to Christmas. It clearly had something to do with my being a boy, but I didn't know what. I asked my brother if he would play with a doll, and he just made a face that said, "I can't believe you asked that. You are so five." Part of me didn't want to want something that would meet with such overt disapproval from both my brother and Grammy, but that reluctance was no match for my desire. I wanted that doll, and I didn't want to have to wait another year for it.

I turned this over and over in my head as I played "Icicle Show," a new game I had invented. I would steal lengths of silver tinsel from our tree and lay on the floor next to the forced-air heating grate, waiting for the furnace to kick in. I'd hold a shiny strand over the grate, and every time a blast of air came up, I'd let go of the tinsel to see how far the hot air could lift it. There was an element of performance art to this. The grate was directly in front of a mirror, which meant that the Christmas tree behind me was also reflected in front of me, yielding an effect in which I felt completely immersed in the glow of colored bulbs. If I tossed a whole handful of silvery strands into the airstream at once, they would spread all over me as they slowly fell to earth. If you looked in the mirror at that precise moment, it was like a scene in a holiday snow globe, and I was the chubby little figurine enjoying the glittery storm.

With hindsight, I can only imagine how that looked to Grammy. If I could turn heating equipment into a fabulous showcase for theatrical play, well, then just imagine where a baby doll might lead. Later, when I was old enough to understand how people perceived and treated effeminate boys, I would understand Grammy's anxiety better. But that year, I was simply a five-year-old innocently pondering his baby doll while listening to Cher. And Grammy wasn't having it.

Christmas morning, then, was a powder keg. Had she pulled off a switcheroo while I slept? Would I have to fake being happy with whatever nonbaby thing was in that box? Or would I find a doll in there after all? Would I spontaneously combust while waiting to find out?

In those years, we still opened presents in the morning. The Christian world is thus divided: there are those who want their loot before bed and those who want to wake up to it the next day. Despite the fact that Grampy and Grammy both would have preferred to be Christmas Eve people, we waited until the morning of the twenty-fifth because of someone's errant notion that this is what children expect. Though we would've been thrilled to open the gifts at the first possible opportunity, we dutifully went to bed present-free so we could wake up to discover whatever delights awaited.

That morning, Grampy was nursing the first stages of a chocolate migraine. Despite the fact that chocolate gave him blinding headaches that sent him to bed for half a holiday at a time, he received boxes of bon bons by the sleighful every Christmas—not because anyone wished him skull-rattling pain and near blindness, but because chocolate was the gift he himself asked for every year. His grown children, fellow churchgoers, and coworkers obliged, figuring that if he wanted the candy, its effects couldn't be that bad. They were wrong, but only those of us who lived in his house were exposed to his increasing levels of grumpiness and irritation, followed by his moans, and then his absence for hours. As always, not feeling obliged to wait for Santa, Grampy had already opened a Whitman's sampler the night before, and thus began Christmas day in his chair with jaw clenched and eyes half closed.

Ignoring his pain, Mom put a Grants department store holiday album on the record player to get us in the mood. We boys knelt by the fake cardboard fireplace Grammy set out for Christmas every year, and as we waited for her to pass out the presents, I tried to remain calm. Grammy's eyes were narrowed, and her lips were set in a tight line as she handed out the first gifts. Perhaps just to be done

with the whole drama—to which only my brother was oblivious—she gave me the shoebox straight away. She didn't say a word, and I swear there was a hush in the room.

Gift in my grasp at last, I could have ripped the wrapping paper off instantly, but I knew that would only have revealed a box underneath still to be opened. That wasn't fast enough for me: the quickest way to know what was inside was to just flip the box over and see if it still cried.

It did—and I wanted to cry as well.

The sheer relief of knowing that, yes, I had gotten the doll made me light-headed. The paper finally came off, the shoebox lid was removed, and there it was: a baby, very bald and all mine.

Who knows what I (or anyone else) got that Christmas. I was busy exploring my new companion. The doll had no hair, real or painted on, so it was clearly a *baby* baby, which I loved. Baldness notwithstanding, I knew by its gorgeous, slightly alien eyes that it must be a girl. The molded plastic of its face featured deep cutouts for startling eyes made of what looked like green glass. Silken auburn eyelashes were affixed to lids inset in the plastic. If I held her a certain way, those freaky eyes would languorously shutter themselves, only to reopen slowly when righted, a feat she repeated over and over again at my will. Oh bliss!

Dolly, a name that came to me in a burst of clear and deeply original inspiration, was dressed. She wore a little two-piece outfit that was soft and pink. And in the way. I began pulling it off immediately, determined to wrap Dolly in a blanket, like a newborn was supposed to be. (If swaddling was good enough for Baby Jesus, obviously it was good enough for Dolly.) But as I pulled off the top I made a discovery that was a brief source of disappointment: Dolly cried whenever she was not on her back.

I'm sure the designer's logic was that if, say, a little Cher fan turned the doll face down and heard her cry, he would instinctively soothe the doll by rocking it, face up, in his meaty arms. But I had decided that babies were to be held to your chest, head on your shoulder, for soothing. I'd long had visions of myself walking around with Dolly in this position, patting her back and being a good little mother boy. Clearly, this would not work: my imagined comfort position would actually make Dolly cry incessantly until I gave in to the position she was designed to prefer. In the spirit of adaptation, I nestled my new babe in the crook of my arm, telling myself I liked the resulting Mary-in-themanger effect. I decided that maybe the baby was better this way after all.

Without thinking, I headed up the stairs, oblivious to the fact that everyone else was still gathered around the tree.

"Where do you think you're going?" asked Grammy, spoiling for a fight.

I paused, wondering how she could even ask such a thing. "I'm going to get Dolly a blanket so she won't be cold." I sounded aggrieved, as if I had not myself just denuded the poor thing, and I gesture toward the frosted windows as if to illustrate the danger.

"It's *winter*." I climbed the last steps until I was just out of sight, but I waited a moment, at the top of the stairs, and heard Grammy turn on my mother.

"Well," she said, "you went and did just what you wanted, didn't you? Now look at him." Grammy couldn't have hidden her disgust if she tried, and, really, she wasn't trying.

I clutched Dolly closer and headed into my room. It was a new and strange feeling that washed over me: the simultaneous sense of being both happy and sad. Grammy had succeeded in casting a pall over my delight, leaving me a little ashamed at how much I already loved my doll. I decided to take my time finding just the right blanket for Dolly.

I couldn't have known then that I would spend the next few months slowly driving Grammy insane on this topic, first by requesting a dress for Dolly, then extending that request to include a matching outfit for me. There was no way for me to know that, sure of my future ruin, she would eventually just trump my mother by taking the doll away and, in return, presenting me with a new set of bedsheets

covered with NFL team logos (not that I knew what the NFL was).

But that all happened later. On Christmas morning, I chose Dolly's swaddling with great care. I rejected my first choice, a pillowcase, because it was the right size but not soft enough. I passed over my favorite flannel pajama top as well, which was soft but had buttons, too rough for a baby's skin. In the end, I took the cozy purple bedspread off my bed and wrapped Dolly in it, despite how the fabric trailed to the floor. I lifted my baby to my shoulder and let her cry for a bit, then rocked her to stillness. "I love you," I told her, as if to make her feel better about her rough welcome into the world.

I knew that I should go back down to join the others and that the longer I didn't, the madder Grammy would be. But it was my job to watch out for Dolly, protecting her from the mockery of my brother, the dismay of Grammy, and even the chocolate-fueled crankiness of Grampy. And as long as I stayed in my room, Christmas would remain whatever I wanted it to be. Everything else could wait.

Bad to Santa

What is growing up but a succession of moments when you understand that you have been missing out on important information that older, wiser people already know? That singsong rhyme you learned turns out to be an alphabet. Your books sound the same every time because those squiggles by the pictures are actually words that you can spell using that alphabet. Many such discoveries lead to proud displays of newfound knowledge and accompanying parental praise. But not every childhood epiphany is so obviously welcomed.

Such is the case with the understanding that Santa may not be real after all. It is perfectly clear to most children that the grown-ups around them are invested in the success of this charade, perhaps because so many youngsters remain deeply attached to the tale. For children who figure the whole thing out, this may present the first ethical dilemma of their young lives: Is it right to play along with the ruse in order to protect others' feelings? What should you do when "honest" and "good" aren't the same thing?

I liked to think of myself as a good boy. In fact, I actively cultivated this notion, playing up the contrast between my cherubic demeanor and my older brother's devil-may-care attitude. He was not himself a demon spawn, but he just couldn't keep a lid on behaviors that were sure to set off Grammy. For starters, Ignacio was more likely to sass back to her, a bad idea, full stop. But he was also much more likely to follow every exciting, adventurous impulse that beckoned him with promises of immediate delight, only to yield trauma and punishment later.

One year, the impulse was to take a sled up onto the porch roof, then ride it unintentionally over melting snow directly through our picture window onto the card table where Grammy did her puzzles. As many gallons of glass-studded snow poured onto the table, Grammy, immune to shock at my brother's antics, simply put her hands on her hips and complained, "That was a fifteen-hundred-piece puzzle!" Even the window disaster, however, was no match for Ignacio's eventual masterpiece, which would involve an abandoned shack, a match, several fire trucks, and a hasty retreat to our bedroom.

And where was I during these misadventures? When Ignacio was up to no good, I was most likely where I was every afternoon: curled up on the couch with my mom, as snug and harmless as a chick in a nest. When he plunged through the porch window, I just stepped back in awe to admire the colliding forces of falling grandson and fuming grandmother. And while he was discovering his inner pyro, I was reading. When Grammy asked if I knew where Ignacio had been, I touted my own benign behavior in my shameless reply.

"My book is really, really good, so I didn't even notice that he was gone until he ran in like he did, and I heard all the sirens."

The truth is, I was no angel—I just knew how to maintain my halo in the presence of others. I was never tempted to break rules set for me about what I could and could not do. And though I remained obedient most of the time, my "good" behavior was a reflection not of moral superiority but rather of a healthy instinct for self-preservation. If I thought I would get caught at something illicit, I just

didn't do it.

If I could get away with something undetected, though, I was all over it. One gorgeous day, for instance, I had sassed back to Mom, who grounded me in the house, barring me from a moment's play outside. But as soon as she left on an errand, I bolted through the front door, aware that Grammy had not caught wind of my grounding. Another time, I had been told to stay out of the plastic wading pool in our backyard, but waited till Mom and Grammy were sucked into their soap operas to wade in anyway, figuring that water, being invisible, would leave no tell-tale traces on my skin when I headed inside to join them later.

Partly because of the opposing nature of our sins, with me breaking mere rules and my brother breaking actual buildings, and partly because I so actively cultivated the notion that I was an innocent boy, Ignacio and I were seen very differently; poor guy, he was trouble, and I was sweet. Only one other person in the world knew the truth about me: Santa Claus. Or, to be more precise, Not Really Santa Claus.

By the time I was six and a half, I didn't believe in Santa. The Santa story came with holes in it from the get-go, such as his tardy appearance long after the gifts had appeared under our tree. Moreover, I think Grammy had some misgivings about actively participating in such a clear falsehood, even a nice one; thus, she spent very little time reinforcing belief in jolly Saint Nick. But all that paled in comparison with a bigger issue: Wasn't Christmas about the baby Jesus, anyway, and not the goings-on in an imaginary North Pole? Santa was clearly an add-on, one who was fun and made for great animated specials, but still. . . .

So, when my brother, hoping at the advanced age of eight to spoil the tale, came to me that year and said, "You know Santa's just made up," I shrugged.

Well, duh. You might think my refusal to be wowed by Ignacio's big revelation would have been a huge disappointment to him. Instead, it acted as a true source of bonding. If neither of us believed in Santa, we could put up a united front against all those silly adults who thought that any kid growing up in the frozen climes of Maine would ever be stupid enough to buy the notion that a fat old man could survive an entire December night outside in an open sled wearing only felt. It was a kind of power, or disbelief, and in its thrall, my brother and I could be a team, at least for a season.

Our shared wisdom united us, even as we kept mum about it. Though we scorned neighboring children who believed this nonsense, we agreed not to mock them to their faces. When April, the girl next door, talked about staying up to see Santa when he landed on her roof, Ignacio and I smirked quietly. When Peter from across the street headed indoors from playing in the snow every afternoon, that he wouldn't miss the half-hour television show in which Santa claimed to be broadcasting from the North Pole, we didn't question his devotion. It was better simply to bask in the smug knowledge that we were so much more mature than our friends. We didn't have to rub their little baby noses in it.

Beyond that, we somehow instinctively knew that bragging about disbelieving in Santa was not an endearing quality around the holidays. We neither wanted to send a friend home in tears, with his psyche forever scarred, nor to suggest to our own family that we were ungrateful smart alecks. Instead, Ignacio joined me in my fakery as we "good little boys" made it clear to the adults that we were very eager to see what Santa would bring us.

This playacting seemed perfectly fair: if grown-ups pretended to believe in Santa, so could we. No one got hurt, everyone got presents, and we all won. It was the earliest example in my life of how some lies are actually considered okay. I would soon notice other proofs of this, like when Grammy's sister Marion asked how she looked, and Grammy praised her. Once my great aunt had left, Grammy went on to call Marion's hair a bird's nest. She was lying about her real opinion but had decided that engaging in a wee bit of falsity was a nicer way of treating her sister than invoking the Audubon Society to her face. Apparently, everyone agreed that the maxim "honesty is the best policy" didn't

apply to bad hair or men in red flannel suits.

With everyone playing dumb, I could have my cake and eat it, too, I reasoned. I didn't believe in Santa as fact, but I enjoyed him quite a bit anyway. I liked his rich red suit, the idea of a flying sleigh all those adorable reindeer, and the elves, who seemed so light in their pointy loafers. And I had even gotten hooked on the Santa show, long on cheer and short on production values, which involved lots of cardboard and a hand puppet or two. For one thing, I liked it because I felt in the know: while most kids were sitting at home trusting this portly pretender, I knew the score. He would say that he had a letter from a Mike or a Betty, and he knew whether these children had been naughty or nice, and this alone was meant to be convincing. By the time he said he was reading David's list, I just rolled my eyes. In the 1970s, Davids were like milkweed pods: we sprang up everywhere. In a school so small that there were only fifty kids in ten grades, I was one of three Davids—and not the only one in my class. Santa was going to have to do better if he wanted to convince me.

Did this keep me from writing him a letter? Not at all. I wrote a "Dear Santa" missive in block letters, enjoying the ritual but not expecting that I would actually receive, say, a real elephant. When my mother asked me if I wanted to mail the letter to the address on the TV screen, I wasn't sure what to make of it? Did *she* believe in Santa? Had my brother not clued her in? Or was she just telling the big lie, too? Not sure if I was protecting her innocence or acting as an accomplice in her deception, I simply handed the letter over. It seemed the right thing to do.

It was one thing to watch the Santa show at home, where I could be alternately entertained and jaded. It was another thing entirely to encounter Santa face to face. I could have played along, displaying my Holiday Angel side, but instead my Inner Smarty Pants took over. And is there a Santa on earth who likes a Smarty Pants?

Late one afternoon, the week before Christmas, my mother, Ignacio, and I were at the bank in Skowhegan. It was not our bank, the little one in Norridgewock where my brother and I each had savings passbooks we didn't quite understand. Mom had heard that Santa was making appearances at the bank in the next town, close to LaVerdiere's Super Drug Store. Seeing as Ignacio was eight and I was six, old enough by 1970s standards to take care of ourselves, Mom dropped us off at the bank to visit Santa while she ran to LaVerdiere's. Can there be a sight more frightening to a hired Saint Nick than a parent receding into the distance without her children in tow?

My brother and I didn't even have to talk about what to do. There was something unspoken in the air, a whiff of polyester wig perhaps, that made us hungry, like wolves following deer. Maybe it was the fact that this jolly old soul lacked a bowl full of jelly, his belt cinched around a narrow waist. Or that the slip of elastic connected to his beard was clearly visible over one ear. The nerve of this man to think we could be so easily fooled! We waited until the few other children in line had left, then cornered our prey.

"Are you the real Santa?" Ignacio asked innocently.

"Well," Not Really Santa said nervously. "Do *you* think I'm Santa?"

Wrong question. "I think that the real Santa is going to be at the North Pole today," I said, laying my cleverest trap.

"That's right," Not Really Santa said, relaxing a little. "I will be."

Ignacio pounced. "He didn't say *you* would be. He said *Santa* would be."

"But I *am* Santa. I'll be at the North Pole tonight!" Not Really Santa was trying, god bless his hopeless soul.

But I was ready.

I pointed at the big bank clock. "Santa will be broadcasting his TV show from the North Pole in ten minutes. How are you going to get there in *ten minutes*?"

Not Really Santa now understood, both from my schoolmarm tone and the I'm-going-to-eat-you

shine in our eyes, that there was no hope of salvation.

“Well, if you don’t really believe in Santa. . .”

“I believe in Santa, but you’re not really Santa, are you?” I asked, smelling blood.

Before Not Really Santa could reply, Ignacio jumped in. “Or are you saying the *other* Santa isn’t real?”

“Well. . .”

Ignacio kept on him.

“Or are you *both* fake?”

I moved in for the kill.

“Why would you pretend to be Santa if you’re not?”

It was pure evil, what I was doing. Here was this nice man trying to bring a little joy to the world (and perhaps sign up a few new checking accounts), and I was badgering him like he was a common criminal on the stand. Moreover, I was accusing him of being the fake version of something I didn’t believe in by comparing him to another version I had already written off as fake in the first place.

“You two move along now.” Not Really Santa’s voice was tight and decidedly lacking in cheer.

“Yeah,” Ignacio said. “We better go, or we’ll miss the *real* Santa on TV.”

“Just move along.” And just like that, Santa turned his back on us, without offering so much as a “ho, ho, ho” or a candy cane for the trip home.

With a last, gloating “Bye Santa!” we headed out the glass door into the parking lot. Admittedly, this wasn’t our finest moment as young citizens. But for brothers more prone to sabotaging each other than to teamwork, our wicked romp was a brief moment of true bonding. For the rest of that season, we remained united in our efforts to keep all the grown-ups assured of our belief.

When Mom pulled up, and we climbed into the backseat, she asked how Santa was. We kept our answer neutral.

“He was okay.”

And then we grinned like madmen all the way home.

Geronimo, Custer, Nixon, and Me

Christmas came early in 1974. Really early, especially if you were a kid. A few days before Thanksgiving, we got some serious snow. By serious, I mean almost three feet in forty-eight hours. As the sky remained dark and heavy, globs continued to pelt the windows hour after hour, and the grown-ups all got nervous, imagining just how they would dig out of this mess. Meanwhile, we kids grew ever more excited. As a seven-year-old, I was in no danger of having to shovel the driveway; all I knew was that once it stopped snowing, the white expanse would truly live up to the term *winter wonderland*, a landscape for playing in, on, or under.

Of course, the days of fun ahead were premised on the snowfall actually stopping. On the second day of the storm, with no letup in sight, Grampy and Grammy bundled themselves into stiff winter coats and thick wool hats to dig a path from our front door to the street. This was no easy task as they first had to get the door open with two feet of heavy snow packed against it. Across the street, old Mrs. Hamilton was chipping away at her own knee-high wall of white. I sat on our staircase, taking in the scene through the living room window: grown-ups in front of every house shoveling as fast as they could in hopes of returning their driveways to view, even as the snow continued to fall and the storm-thick skies stayed dark. It was an epic task, one that the shovelers seemed to conduct wordlessly, while I kept cozy inside and listened to a stack of Grant's Christmas albums.

The next morning, the sun peered down at us through a thick gauze curtain, revealing yet another foot of accumulation, obscuring the previous day's labors. Three feet of snow is a lot, but when added on top of nearly a foot of existing snow, then pushed to even greater heights by the snowplows that passed up and down our street, the result was transformative. The houses on the block suddenly looked smaller and closer together. The first holiday lawn ornaments of the season had disappeared entirely under snow cover, as had the last remaining bikes of the most stubborn kids. The shrubs and tree stumps that marked the topography of our neighborhood had been reduced to mere contours. Best of all, the windows were covered up to the halfway point by the new drifts.

This was not an unusual occurrence in those years. For several winters running, we had received enough snowfall to encase the entire first floor of each house on the block for a few days at a time. Most years, though, we didn't approach that benchmark until February. To get three feet of snow toward that goal all at once, not only before the New Year but before Christmas, was an incredible boon for us kids.

If kids in Maine know anything, it's how to play in snow. Once the snow was more than a couple of feet deep, we would dig tunnels from house to house, a workout surpassing anything that summer required of us. Using just our mittens and maybe a small hand shovel, we burrowed through hard-packed snow, carving out round pathways just nominally bigger than ourselves. The paths were almost all horizontal, so we could wriggle and snake our way forward from destination to destination, often tumbling out the exit hole on the other side in a heap. Occasionally, we'd make forts big enough to stand up in, but mostly we focused on a serpentine network of tunnels entirely invisible from above.

What must it have been like for our parents to look out their windows and see nothing but unbroken whiteness and think to themselves, *Well, they must be in there somewhere.*

The down side to tunnels was obvious: collapse. I hated being halfway to the exit hole at the next house only to have the snow pile in on me. Getting a mouthful of snow wasn't the worst trauma ever, but if it was unexpected, it made me panic a little bit; I'd wriggle backwards as fast as I could to escape and not, as I could picture all too well, end up buried till spring.

We didn't play on top of the snow around our house much, seeing as that would have risked our stepping on a tunneling friend's head just below the surface. If we wanted to cross over the snow, instead of burrow through it, we were likely to do so in the field running behind all the backyards on our street. Because the field was wind scoured, the snow was never as deep. The few kids who had snowshoes used them there; several of us strapped on tennis rackets for the same effect, and we swore it was just as good. (It wasn't.)

But there was no better way to approach snow than from above. By "above," I mean from the rooftops of our houses, where we kids were allowed to play when the snow was especially deep. Grammy had even set rules for it: we could play on the rooftops, *but* if even a sliver of light peeked through the big window on our porch, it was game over. Ignacio and I considered ourselves lucky because the guy who plowed our driveway usually banked the snow by the porch, helping to cover the wide picture window sooner than nature alone would allow. The banked snow made it a breeze to climb up to the top, where we'd wander around proudly at perilous heights. That year, with so much snow so soon, was going to be an exceptional one for playing on the roof.

But we couldn't start immediately. One blizzard hadn't been quite enough to block the window completely, and things cleared up for Thanksgiving Day.

While the rest of the world dug out from the blizzard, that weekend Grammy and Mom had decided to take Ignacio and me snowsuit shopping in the nearby "city" of Waterville. A college town of twelve thousand with a dozen restaurants and not one, but two, shopping plazas, we thought it a true metropolis. For one thing, compared to Norridgewock, Waterville was on the cutting edge of Christmas light technology, with house after house outlined in brightly colored bulbs, many set to automated flashing patterns. My favorite display had crossed candy canes blinking on the lawn, tall snowmen flanking the home's front steps, and a set of reindeer, lit from inside, that appeared to be lifting off for flight. Heading into Waterville so soon after the big snowstorm, we found the reindeer and bulbs alike buried, their lights shining through the crust of snow the way glaciers glow from within.

At Rich's Department Store, Mom and Grammy scouted the racks in search of snowsuits, while I openly gawked at "the city folk." Look—a woman with Christmas tree earrings and green eye-shadow! Over there—a guy with hair as long as a Breck girl's and tiny little eyeglasses! Grammy admonished me to stop staring at strangers and pay attention to the suits she had found: mine burgundy and Ignacio's navy. We didn't even take the time to try them on; we just stood still in place while Mom held them up in front of us to see if they fit. It was decided that we would get the same size, despite the fact that Ignacio was eighteen months older and two inches taller than I was. Having looked at the smaller snowsuit for me that Mom held up first, Grammy bit her lip before announcing "He'll never fit into that thing. No toothpick, that one."

To her way of thinking, the extra material intended for length would be pulled upward to accommodate my noticeable width, and that would balance things out. She was pretty close to right. I didn't care because this was a marvel of engineering: the entire thing was one piece, its single zipper running from foot to neck, with a hood and gloves that snapped on at thick rivets, encasing the wearer in a storm-fighting bundle of impenetrable fabric.

I couldn't wait to get home, despite the fact that it was too late to play in the snow. I just wanted to

try on my snowsuit, which I did, only to encounter a side effect of the fierce fabric. It was *loud*. The material was so stiff that it would not be enough to say that it crinkled when I walked. It was more like the sound you'd make when vigorously sanding old paint off metal. It gave me the shivers, so I pulled the hood up over my ears to mute the noise. That helped, and my happiness with my new purchase was restored. The rich red color also distracted from my miserable winter boots; while the other kids had cool snowmobile boots with jazzy stripes of color, Ignacio and I wore the same felt-lined rubber boots that Grampy and ancient Eldon Lee from church wore. Our new hi-tech playsuits more than made up for our embarrassing footwear.

Every snowfall over the next few weeks got us closer to the goal of roof time, and soon enough we were scrambling up over the eaves. By Christmas, a halfdozen kids were perched on our rooftop for their first jump of the year. You see, it wasn't really the rooftop that was the ultimate goal: it was snow-jumping *off* the rooftop. Jumping is a core ingredient of childhood, after all. In the spring, we jumped into puddles barefoot, making the biggest splash possible. In the summer, we jumped out of trees and into ponds. In the fall, we made enormous leaf piles to jump into after a running start. But nothing matched snow-jumping for the pure rush. The distance from roof to snowbank wasn't typically enormous, but the view from up high made it feel more dangerous, and my heart raced during the brief fall to the snow below.

Most of the kids' roofs were sharply pitched peaks lined with corrugated aluminum, a New England architectural detail intended to keep buildings from collapsing under the weight of accumulated snow. The combination of steep angle and slippery surface made it almost scarier to ascend the roof than to leap off it. Compared to most houses, our porch roof was angled at a gentle pitch, and the snowbanks were piled so close to the eaves that the whole experience was perfect for my comfort level. I could live a little dangerously, but only a little. I didn't have to be a true daredevil to take the plunge.

After Christmas, though, the stakes were raised as the drifts grew even deeper. People began taking photographs of the drifts to send to relatives out of state as proof that we weren't exaggerating about the snow. Christmas trees set out for removal poked out of drifts so far off the ground that they appeared to float above the street. By the week of New Year's, our little roof was no longer exciting enough, and someone suggested we jump from the tallest house on the street instead.

At three full stories, the Gardiner house seemed to tower on its lot. Of all the neighborhood kids, only I had ever been inside; Peter Gardiner and I were the youngest kids on the street, so we ended up playing together a lot. It was up to me, then, to ask his family if we could go up on their roof. It wasn't a task I relished.

I shuffled noisily up their stairs in my snowsuit—scrape, scrape, scrape—dreading whom I would find. Luckily, Peter's Grandpa, who was generally uninterested in kids' nonsense, answered the door and bravely made my request. I think his exact words were, "I don't care what you kids get up to as long as you don't make a lot of ruckus."

So it was that we kids, not having alerted any parents to our plans, found ourselves in the attic of the Gardiner house, stepping out onto the roof, one at a time, for the snow jump of all snow jumps. Because the sun sets so early in the winter in Maine, it was already getting dark by the time we started jumping. Ignacio's best friend, Darren, went first, and he slipped a little on the roof. He said the F-word, as I called it, which both scandalized me and made me nervous. I was beginning to regret this choice of venue, so much higher than what I was used to, but everyone else seemed excited. When Darren leapt, he yelled "Geronimooo" to much cheering and applause; Ignacio followed suit with a cry of "General Custer!" I realized I needed to quickly come up with not only the nerve to make a leap but some signature action on top of it.

I decided to do my Nixon wave.

It had been a big deal in our house on the late summer day a few months before when Nixon left

office. On a perfectly sunny afternoon, everyone had come inside and stood in the living room, silently glued to the images on the screen of Nixon walking away from the White House. When I asked what was going on, Mom explained that the president was giving his job to the other guy on the screen. When Nixon climbed the steps of the helicopter, I asked where he was going, and Grammy simply said, "Away, I hope."

The meaning of the moment was lost on me, but the way it had stopped everyone cold in his tracks made its magnitude clear. When the guy who had just given away his presidency waved farewell, his wave was so big, so over the top, he was like a cartoon character saying goodbye. I fell in love with that gesture—it was so outsized and dramatic. One arm covered half his face as the wave began and then he swung wide, ending with a two-hand salute, which I thought looked like the peace symbol that I'd seen hippies flash on the news. Arms wide over his stiff body, Nixon was a grinning, human letter Y. He might have been losing his job and going away, but he sure didn't look sad about it.

I had practiced that wave countless times since, and it always cracked adults up. I didn't know why exactly, but I loved earning a big laugh, so I kept it up. That wave was to be my big dismount from the third-story rooftop at the Gardiner's house, except that as soon as I stepped onto the pitch, I lost my footing and fell over. (This was a move more Ford than Nixon, not that I or anyone else yet knew it.) Somehow, I ended up on my back, head down, and that is the position I remained in as I slid along one of the aluminum grooves and shot off the rooftop into the cold air. Two stories is a long way to fall, especially if you are upside-down, and I screamed the whole way. I must have made quite a picture: a fat red bullet plummeting toward the snowbank as my friends scattered to avoid being crushed.

Ignacio ran over and stood above me, his breath frozen into long plumes as he asked if I was all right.

"Of course, I'm not," I said, furious, and painfully rolled myself down the snowbank to run home. registered in the back of my mind that no one was pursuing me, that despite my obvious near-death experience, those damn fools were heading back inside to jump some more.

When I burst into the house, crying about my fall, Grammy and Mom were in the middle of preparing dinner. They could hardly make sense of what I was saying, but it seemed to me that they got the gravity of the situation right away as they both paled visibly. For a moment, I could see them looking at each other for help, as if conspiring about how to solve a problem that seemed to have something to do with my snowsuit. It took a moment before I had any idea what they were looking at. I blame this lag in my recognition of the true situation on the fact that I was numb with cold from playing outside all afternoon. But as the warmth of our woodstove brought feeling back to my limbs, I discovered what they had seen immediately upon my entry: the fancy new snowsuit had been no match for the hearty corrugated roofing. The raised groove that had guided my downward trajectory had also slit open my snowsuit from butt cheek to heel. And as soon as the blood had returned to my frozen limbs, it pushed outward through the new cut, tracing the line where the snowsuit had split. The screaming mess I had been when I walked through the door was nothing next to the banshee I became when I could finally feel the three-foot-long boo-boo on my backside.

That winter Grammy added a new rule to the snowgame restrictions: no one was ever allowed to play on the Gardiner's roof again. I didn't need the rule. Think of it as the first New Year's resolution of my life: I wasn't going to snow-jump ever again. Period. I would still play outdoors all winter, but I'd confine my adventures to harmless snow tunnels. Granted, I couldn't show off my Nixon wave in the narrow icy burrows, but since I also never emerged wounded from a snow tunnel, I considered the trade-off a blessing.



Jealous of Baby Jesus

The same year as the big snowfall, many Christmas stories competed for my attention, most of them television specials with singing and dancing clay figures. A wise second-grader, I knew these were silly made-up stories, but I found little kernels of reality in some of them. *The Year Without a Santa Claus* might as well have been a version of my family photo: plump, melodramatic Heat Miser standing in for me; skinny, aggrieved Cold Miser for Ignacio; and Mother Nature, sweet on the surface but controlling all nature with her iron fist, for Grammy. Even better was *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* in which a deer who is bad at sports and a little elf who has great hair run off together to find out where they belong.

Yet, no matter how deep my love of these stories, nor how thoroughly I had memorized their folksy musical numbers, not one of them remotely approached the narrative power for me of what Christians call the Nativity story. I was a little bothered by the word “nativity”—what on earth did it mean? Something about natives?—but I found the tale itself thrilling. When I thought of poor Mary, my mind went straight to this one expectant mother in my church, her belly big in front of her, who groaned softly every time she settled onto one of the hard century-old pews. If sitting on those pews was uncomfortable, what must it have been like for Mary to ride on a bony donkey? And worse, since the story was always told in December, I projected a Maine winter onto the streets of Bethlehem; I could just see Joseph leaning into the wind of a winter’s night, realizing he could no longer feel his cheeks.

At last, so the story went, one sort-of-kind soul took pity on the exhausted couple, offering up a stable for them to camp out in. I lived in rural Maine, and I could picture this all too well. On Jack Hicks’s farm, the stalls were coated with a mixture of dirty straw and cow poo, and they smelled. Christmas carols all ignored this icky reality and instead focused on the word “manger,” which sounded kind of nice. At age seven, I had never heard “manger” used in any other context but the Nativity, so when I finally realized that it meant “trough,” I felt a little nauseous. Mary and Joseph not only had to make their camp in poo, the only place for their baby was a stinky box that cows stuck their dripping noses into.

Yet all that dreariness was the perfect set up for the big finish: the Nativity drama came with a happy ending in which a huge starburst announced the baby’s arrival, angels sang, shepherds ditched their dim livestock to see what the fuss was about, and even kings dropped whatever royal-type thing they were doing and rode camels all the way to Bethlehem for the baby shower. Cosmic eruptions, heavenly choirs, and expensive presents—Baby Jesus had it made.

For a hammy kid intent on crowd pleasing, this really was the greatest story ever told: the night that a little boy made the whole world watch. Secretly, shamefully, I had to admit that I was jealous of Baby Jesus. I knew it was crazy to wish that I could be the star of such a scene, when the Cute Kid to end all Cute Kids had already been born two thousand years before I arrived ready for my close-up. Yet I just couldn’t help wonder what it would feel like to have all eyes on me like that.

The closest approximation of such adoration that I'd seen firsthand had been in Miami—and it wasn't for me. In Miami, my brother enjoyed the role of Firstborn Son. In Cuban culture, this made him a rock star; relatives fawned over Ignacito, "little Ignacio," whose existence was the proudest accomplishment of big Ignacio, our father. While people praised and flattered my brother, I was a mere redundancy, just the chubby other son. If I wanted any sort of residual afterglow from the light shining on Ignacio, I had to tag around after him, something he rarely allowed me to do.

Back home in our small town, there was definitely no such Firstborn Son privilege for Ignacio. In fact, because I carefully maintained my Good Boy status, I was the favored one much of the time, at least with Mom. Grammy, however, was too old to indulge either of us with any kind of coddling.

Grammy fawned over just one person: my Uncle Russell. Neither the youngest nor the oldest of five children, he was clearly the apple of Grammy's eye nonetheless. She referred to him as "my baby" and swelled with special pride at the mention of his name, despite the fact that his other siblings weren't exactly chopped liver: one brother was a police chief, another was a pastor, and the older sister owned a jewelry store. Though Grammy was proud of them all, there was something about Russell that made her features soften and the twinkle in her blue eyes emerge.

That Christmas was one of the few times Russell came home from Tennessee. He had moved south when he was younger to marry a woman twice his age who had once been his church school teacher, a development that had crushed Grammy. With no love lost between Russell's wife and his family in Maine, when he finally came back for a visit, he came alone.

His arrival may not have occasioned an angelic host to sing, but it certainly felt like a star was shining. Grammy instantly transformed into a playful, almost girlish person, someone I had never seen before. It was a little like the moment in *Santa Claus Is Coming to Town* when mean old Burgermeister Meisterburger is given a yo-yo and suddenly becomes a babbling boy. Grammy and Russell joked with each other like pals, and I marveled that he not only dared to tease her but that she'd just laugh, poking him and telling him to behave himself. And this seemed to cause a ripple effect. Mom was cheerful, Grampy relaxed, and a steady stream of friends and relatives came to our door, despite the still-growing drifts of snow.

Russell didn't make much of an impression on me at first. I remember him as tall, round faced, and balding by thirty—a silly putty version of Grampy, but younger and with real teeth. What won me over was a nifty feat of kitchen magic on the Saturday night of his visit. Because we were living on Grandparent Time, we had already eaten supper at four o'clock and had long been settled in for our ritualized family viewing of *Wide World of Sports*, *The Lawrence Welk Show*, and *Hee Haw*. As a grown-up living on real time, Russell was not interested in eating on the geriatric schedule, and several hours after we'd eaten, he announced that he was making pizza. Perhaps noticing that Grammy had her lips parted to protest, he added, "And if no one else wants any, the dough will keep." Only because it was Russell, Grammy closed her mouth and turned her attention back to the television. It must have been an act of supreme will for her to sit there quietly, knowing that there would soon be flour all over her kitchen after she'd already done the dishes and wiped down the sideboard.

Not finding Lawrence Welk quite as "wunnerful" as Grammy and Grampy that night, I eventually padded out to the kitchen to see what Russell was up to. The only light on was the one bulb hanging over the sink. The rest of the room receded into darkness around that small bulb's yellow halo. Russell stood with his back to me, pulling dough and punching it. When he realized I was there, he said, "Want to see something?" Without waiting for my answer, he threw the dough into the air. It slipped briefly into shadow and then wobbled back to his balled fists, which he used to catch and flip the dough onto a cutting board with a resonant slapping sound. And then he did it again. It was mesmerizing.

For such a son, Grammy had to make sure Christmas was perfect. That day, she started her work in

the kitchen in the morning and then kept at it for hours. In addition to a turkey the size of a Volkswagen to roast, ~~there were two pies to bake, Jell-O to set in a heart-shaped mold, cranberry relish to make from scratch, and a host of assorted side dishes to prepare, including the green bean casserole with French onions that she only made when we had guests over after church.~~ Supper got pushed back all the way to the cosmopolitan hour of five o'clock to allow for a nominal compromise with relatives used to dining a little later. The house smelled like heaven to a little boy with a good appetite, and I was more than ready to eat when Grammy told everyone the food was ready.

But we were in for a rude surprise. With too many people to fit in the dining room, Grammy had set up a satellite table on the porch for Ignacio and me. This demotion to a kids' table—with only two kids, mind you—shocked me. Ignacio and I *always* ate at the real table, our assigned spots seemingly set in stone: Ignacio directly across from me, with Mom and Grampy on either end of the table, and Grammy at my side. This was the natural order, the way it should be. I started to protest, but Grammy had neither time nor interest.

“Food won't taste a bit different just for being on the porch. It's not like you can't see us from there.”

And that was that.

An outrage, but I couldn't make a big stink about it, or everyone would think I was a spoiled brat—not my goal. Exiled to the tan folding table reserved for Grammy's puzzles, I felt as if I'd been abandoned on the island of discarded grandchildren. I brooded, and brooded some more, not that anyone noticed. I could hear the grown-ups talking over each other, their voices creating a clamor seldom heard in our house. Compared to the average *Buena Noche* celebration in Miami, this was probably a dinner party of church mice, but by Norridgewock standards, it ranked as a festive blowout. Ignacio didn't seem to care, instead fiddling with a transistor radio to see if he could find Wolfman Jack or something just as good, but I was annoyed to be so excluded. And, contrary to Grammy's claims, my green bean casserole did not taste as good as I knew it would have at the table.

I was dying to be in on the hubbub. I had to concoct a plot that would somehow display my exemplary long-suffering nature, prove that I had the holiday spirit, and earn my return to the action at once. I couldn't whine or look petulant, for it was crucial that everyone realize for themselves that they should be including me. Then inspiration hit: I could achieve all of this with Legos.

These were old-school Legos, which is to say they were just rectangles. That's it. No curves or hinges or wheels. Making elaborate designs required cunning, skill, and a kind of imaginative blindness: you had to be willing to see the idea of a creation, not its literal squareness. Once I hit upon this idea, my cooling food was of even less interest. Leaving Ignacio and his radio, I skirted the edge of the dining room, squeezed quietly behind Mom's chair, and headed into the living room to produce my masterpiece—the first-ever Lego Nativity.

Kneeling beneath our tree, I moved presents around to create a place of honor for the crèche-to-be. Though the building process was not, as it turned out, effortless, it started out smoothly enough. The stall itself was easy to make, and I used all of my yellow Legos on its thatched roof. The manger was even easier to build, as if Legos had been designed specifically so one could construct a perfect baby-sized feedbox. The color was an issue: I knew a trough in those ancient days would have been made of wood, but I didn't have any brown Legos, so I picked metal-looking blue pieces instead. But the degree of difficulty increased exponentially from there.

For those intent on creating holiday dioramas using only rectangles, here is a partial list of the things that are impossible to replicate convincingly: angels, sheep, oxen, camels, a little drummer boy, three wise men, Mary, Joseph, and anything resembling a baby. The animals stumped me for so long that my relatives were on seconds before I had the first livestock completed. This was not good, as I needed to be done with the scene before the plates were cleared and dessert was set out; according to

my plan, in that postmeal lull before the pies arrived, my family would notice what I was doing and be awed by the simple beauty of my handiwork. They would all bring their dessert plates into the living room and gather around my Nativity scene to eat. I would join them for pie and adoration, and Christmas Eve would thus be restored.

That meant I was on the clock. Fortunately, I had an epiphany; I realized that if I did not stack the Legos horizontally, but instead stood them up vertically, using their length to form legs, I could approximate living creatures. And if it could work for beasts, why not kings and shepherds? Yes, this meant that cows and wise men were roughly similar in height, but a little tinsel from the tree helped mark the Magi as more royal.

The holy family posed a greater challenge. While it was fine for the bit players to be faceless, expressionless stick figures, I could not accept this for the leads. Joseph and Mary needed eyes, noses, and mouths, and Jesus had to be soft and sweet and babyish. The solution for the first part of that dilemma waited several branches up on the tree. We had two bright-red mouse ornaments that had adorned every tree since the 1950s and were supposed to represent Grammy and Grampy. One mouse was tall and skinny, and one, short and round; in theory, the short one was Grammy, though in life, she was more physically imposing than Grampy. Beyond that, the Grampy mouse had a gold lamé fringe around his entire neck, which seemed better suited to Elizabeth-Taylor-as-Cleopatra than to Grampy, mouse, or Joseph. I hesitated, really wanting Mary to have the pretty necklace, but as I knew everyone would see the tall mouse as Joseph, I gave in and placed it behind the manger in the manly head-of-stall spot. I settled the shorter mouse next to it, where Mary would be, which turned out to be perfect—the Mary mouse was at the ideal height to gaze in at her babe. Not that he yet existed.

Nothing on the tree seemed a good option for Baby Jesus. Reindeer were out, as were glitter-covered bulbs. I looked at a snowman for a while, but when laid horizontally, as it would be in a manger, he appeared to be a pregnant woman. How confusing would that be? So I stole a page from the soap operas we watched and decided that just a bundle of cloth would be enough to suggest a baby. A box of Kleenex sat on the end table next to the couch, and within moments, a soft, white babe had been born and placed gently in his hard plastic crib. And once I had the Kleenex out, I expanded beyond swaddling clothes to clothes in general, wrapping Mary and Joseph in attire that resembled the drapery outfits they wore in Bible illustrations. You could hardly tell they were red felt mice at all. As a grace note, I moved a star ornament to the branch just above the scene. At last, I was done.

I was also late. When I turned to see if dessert was being served yet, I found, to my horror, that the pies had been cut long before and consumed as well. Relatives were already standing around in their we're-just-about-to-leave poses. There was no time for subtlety. "There's a Nativity in the living room," I blurted out, as if I had just myself noticed. No one heard me. "There's a *Nativity* in the *living room!*"

Not wanting to reveal my desperation, but actually desperate that someone should notice before it was entirely too late, I went straight to the golden boy. "Uncle Russell," I said. "Come see!"

Still talking to my Aunt Jean, Russell let me drag him into the living room. I pointed beneath the tree.

This is what I saw: a baby sleeping in his manger, with his mother leaning in close and his father standing tall above, while animals, kings, and shepherds stood guard in even numbers on either side beneath a perfect roof that kept out the winter winds.

This is what Russell saw: a big Lego triangle containing a dozen tall plastic block formations, some strung with tinsel, all gathered around a pair of mice and a tiny blue box stuffed with Kleenex. He was silent for a moment, working it out.

Finally, he pointed to the manger.

"It's a swimming pool, right? And that's water?" Indicating the taller pieces, he went on, "And

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