

Santa Claus: The True Story

I remember my first Christmas party with Grandma. I was just a kid. I remember tearing across town on my bike to visit her on the day my big sister dropped the bomb: "There is no Santa Claus," she jeered. "Even dummies know that!"

My grandma was not the gushy kind, never had been. I fled to her that day because I knew she would be straight with me. I knew Grandma always told the truth, and I knew that the truth always went down a whole lot easier when swallowed with one of her world-famous cinnamon buns.

Grandma was home, and the buns were still warm. Between bites, I told her everything. She was ready for me. "No Santa Claus!" she snorted. "Ridiculous!"

Don't believe it. That rumor has been going around for years, and it makes me mad, plain mad. Now, put on your coat, and let's go."

"Go? Go where, Grandma?" I asked. I hadn't even finished my second cinnamon bun.

"Where" turned out to be Kirby's General Store, the one store in town that had a little bit of just about everything. As we walked through its doors, Grandma handed me ten dollars. That was a bundle in those days. "Take this money," she said, "and buy something for someone who needs it. I'll wait for you in the car." Then she turned and walked out of Kirby's.

I was only eight years old. I'd often gone shopping with my mother, but never had I shopped for anything all by myself. The store seemed big and crowded, full of people scrambling to finish their Christmas shopping. For a few moments I just stood there, confused, clutching that ten-dollar bill, wondering what to buy, and who on earth to buy it for. I thought of everybody I knew: my family, my friends, my neighbors, the kids at school, the people who went to my church. I was just about thought out, when I suddenly thought of Bobbie Decker. He was a kid with bad breath and messy hair, and he sat right behind me in Mrs. Pollock's grade-two class.

Bobbie Decker didn't have a coat. I knew that because he never went out for recess during the winter. His mother always wrote a note, telling the teacher that he had a cough, but all we kids knew that Bobbie Decker didn't have a cough, and he didn't have a coat. I fingered the ten-dollar bill with growing excitement. I would buy Bobbie Decker a coat. I settled on a red corduroy one that had a hood to it. It looked real warm, and he would like that.

"Is this a Christmas present for someone?" the lady behind the counter asked kindly, as I laid my ten dollars down. "Yes," I replied shyly. "It's ... for Bobbie." The nice lady smiled at me.

I didn't get any change, but she put the coat in a bag and wished me a Merry Christmas.

That evening, Grandma helped me wrap the coat in Christmas paper and ribbons, and write, "To Bobbie, From Santa Claus" on it -- Grandma said that Santa always insisted on secrecy.

Then she drove me over to Bobbie Decker's house, explaining as we went that I was now and forever officially one of Santa's helpers.

Grandma parked down the street from Bobbie's house, and she and I crept noiselessly and hid in the bushes by his front walk

Then Grandma gave me a nudge. "All right, Santa Claus," she whispered, "get going."

I took a deep breath, dashed for his front door, threw the present down on his step, pounded his doorbell and flew back to the safety of the bushes and Grandma.

Together we waited breathlessly in the darkness for the front door to open. Finally it did, and there stood Bobbie.

Forty years haven't dimmed the thrill of those moments spent shivering, beside my grandma, in Bobbie Decker's bushes. That night, I realized that those awful rumors about Santa Claus were just what Grandma said they were: ridiculous. Santa was alive and well, and we were on his team.