

The End of Christmas

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Santa stared out the front window of his Swiss styled chalet. His expression was one of concern. He watched contemplatively as tall fir trees swayed side to side from the cold southern winds and large flakes of pure white snow danced like fallen leaves in a hurricane. The scene wasn't anything he hadn't witnessed before. Living at the North Pole, this kind of weather was more the norm than the exception. It was always cold, there was always snow, and there were usually winds. Still he wore the face of dread. It was December 24th, eve of his big day. Observation continued for several minutes.

"I can't do this anymore," he finally said, more to himself than to anyone else.

"Do what anymore, dear?" Mrs. Claus had entered the room carrying a silver tray with a large plate of fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies and a tall glass of whole milk. She set the tray on a small wooden end table next to Santa's favorite chair.

"This... this Christmas thing." He responded. "All of it. I just can't do it."

"Are you worried about the weather, dear?" Mrs. Claus asked. "This isn't anything new, we have these conditions all the time. And don't forget," Mrs. Claus' face lit up with a big toothy smile. "We have Rudolf."

"No." Brushing aside her comment, Santa turned from the window and started toward a large red velvet lounge. "It's not just the weather, that's only part of it. It's... It's..." Santa stopped and gestured to the snacks. "Well, take milk and cookies for instance. Look what I do to myself, to my body." He grabbed large layers of his own belly rolls in both hands. "I'm fat, and I have all the problems that go with it. My cholesterol is through the roof, my tri-glycerides are off the chart, and I can't go down a chimney without wheezing like asthmatic elephant. I'm surprised I don't leave every child on the planet with some level of trauma from the commotion I make. Doc is constantly riding me about my weight. I have to work like a dog to get back into reasonable shape. From December 26th until summer, I watch what I eat and spend countless hours on the treadmill to lose a number of the extra pounds just so I can start eating again in July to put it all back on again. My body can't take it anymore."

Mrs. Claus quietly watched and listened. She had heard these rants before. It was pretty much the same thing every year at this time. He would gripe and complain about all the pain and suffering only to eventually come around with more joy and excitement than ever before. She thought it was just nerves, so she let him fuss.

"You know good and well that I am lactose intolerant, have been for at least a hundred or so years. All the milk just gives me gas. The reindeer are all glad they are in front of the sleigh." He glared at the white liquid like it was poison. He turned his attention to the plate of cookies. He picked one up and stared at it. "As for the cookies, one of these years I'm just going to hurl. I will, you know, from here to the South Pole. I have so grown to hate cookies and I especially can't stand sugar cookies." He took a bite out of the cookie, distorted his face into a grimace, and set the remains of the cookie back down on the plate. "Oh, but I eat them. The kids leave them out for me and I eat them... as a curtesy I take a bite out of at least one cookie in each house I visit. Do you know how many cookies that is?" Mrs. Claus didn't answer, Santa mumbled to himself as he counted on his fingers. "That's approximately one-sixth of a cookie in roughly three billion houses... That's around five hundred million whole cookies." He exclaimed. "And, they all go directly to my belly and my butt."

Mrs. Claus couldn't help but snicker at that comment. "Now dear," she said. "The children expect you to be jolly and round. That's just the way it has always been."

"Oh, screw that," he said as he plopped down in the chair. "I can't handle jolly and round any more, it's killing me."

Mrs. Claus was taken back. While Santa had ranted before, she had never seen it quite this bad. He was genuinely and seriously irritated.

Santa sat up on the edge of the chair and faced the Mrs. "My knees ache, my back aches, I have terrible heart burn, and every December I get a rash on my inner thighs that would make mother Theresa swear out loud. And for what?"

"For the kids," said Mrs. Claus, looking him straight in the eyes. "You do it for the children."

"Oh, don't even get me started on the children," Santa shot back. He straightened himself in his seat. "If I do it for them, I must be nuts. Do you know, that I went over my list again yesterday? It's official, this year I actually have more kids on the naughty list than I do the nice. I thought I was there last year, but after checking a third time, nice just barely won out. This year, it's true. Naughty rules! And sadly, the numbers have been getting worse every year. If the trend continues, and I don't see any reason why it won't, within five years we will go broke supplying coal to all the sniveling little heathens in the world."

Mrs. Claus sent Santa a stern look, "That's enough dear. There are still nice kids out there. Consider them."

"Nice kids. Right!" Santa gazed at the ceiling and went introspective for a brief moment then started talking again. "Of the nice kids, the majority no longer believe in me..." He looked at his wife, "Did you know that? Which is fine by them because they get whatever they want anyway. All the so called parents of the good kids buy them off. Instead of giving them time, attention, love, all that they really need, parents give them things. Kids get more crap these days than they know what to do with. You name it, cell phones, game consoles, televisions, hundred dollar sneakers, anything to keep them 'happy'. And not just at Christmas. They get crap all the time." Santa shook his head solemnly. "They don't need me. There was a day when Christmas was a special time, when kids got that one special thing they had been waiting for all year long. It was a time of anticipation and excitement. Kids would wake their parents before the roosters crowed to get to the tree. Not so much anymore. In this era kids sleep in until 9 or 10 a.m. Parents usually have to wake the children. The kids casually saunter to the living room and start tearing into packages. There's no anticipation, only expectation. If a gift isn't something they want they cast it aside and start on the next one. 'I hope you saved the receipts,' they would say. You know, I was once the symbol of faith, hope, 'The joy of Giving'," Santa paused. "Those days are gone. Now I am the poster child for 'entitlement'." Santa plopped back in the seat, sighing dramatically. "I am a forgotten relic."

"Surely it isn't that bad," Mrs. Claus interjected. "There are enough who still believe."

Santa looked at Mrs. Claus. "Do you know how many letters I receive each year before Christmas?" he asked, and without giving her the chance to respond he continued. "I get more than a billion letters every year. Yes, there are kids who still believe, I do get lots of mail." Santa turned his

head and looked reflectively toward the window. "Actually, I get lots of demands. Gimmy, gimmy, gimmy is all I hear. Each letter contains a list of impossible, unreasonable requests longer than my left leg. Not a single letter includes just one thing, and not a single letter includes something for someone else." He turned back to his wife. She waited, quietly. "And, do you know how many thank-you notes I receive each year after Christmas?" Again without giving her the chance to respond, he held up his right hand with a closed fist and answered the question. "Zero, none, nada, zilch, I don't get a single one. How sad is that? Even those that 'believe' are a bunch of thoughtless, inconsiderate ingrates. If I wasn't giving the bulk of them the benefit of a doubt they would probably be on my naughty list too. I don't know why I even care. They don't."

Mrs. Claus walked over and knelt down next to Santa. I'm sure they do, I'll just bet in all the excitement with nice new things, the New Year, and their impending return to school, they forget."

"Bah! They sure remember their lists," Santa scoffed. "Instead of thank-you notes, I get hate mail. Last year I was chewed out by a six year old because I only delivered three of the twelve things she had listed. She was serious. She included a picture she drew of my sleigh going up in flames. That's not all. An eight year old wrote and said if I didn't deliver this year he will be suing me for mental and psychological anguish. He mentioned 'class action'. His dad is an attorney, I can actually see that happening. A seven year old tried to blackmail me threatening claims of abuse and neglect. Do you believe that? And these are the 'nice' kids." Santa sat stoically for several minutes. "I realize that these examples are not a reflection of the masses, as a matter of fact they are but a small sample. There is a lot of good in the world, but the few are ruining it for the many. It's not worth the headaches or the heartaches." Mrs. Claus grasped his hand and stared up at his face.

"No, it's far more than the weather. It's about physical issues, and not just the weight. Every year after the big trip I come down with something. One would think as long as I have been doing this that I would be immune to any and everything out there, but without fail I get sick. Every year the entire month of January I am laid out like a bear-skin rug. If it's not the cold or flu it's some strain of super virus. I suppose spanning the various climates and crossing differing levels of civilization I should expect that, but it doesn't make it any more fun. It's actually quite annoying."

"It's about mental strain. Do you realize how much preparation goes into a one day trip? It's a logistical nightmare. I have to traverse the globe and drop billions of presents in a single 24 hour period. That's not easy. And, with population increases and global sprawl, it becomes more complicated every year. And, the trip only happens after months of scouring through list after list of children's names. Checking them twice, or in some cases even three times, trying to determine as best I can who was naughty and who was nice. There's a great deal of thought that goes into that, and the grey matter isn't what it used to be."

"I have to deal with toy production problems, with livestock concerns, and with personnel issues. Did you know the elves want to form a union? They want representation." He stared at Mrs. Claus with a look of real concern. "When I heard that, I had to ask myself, why. I have done so much for them. They already have a fixed 40 hour work week, they get full benefits, including a 401K and stock options. They get free room and board. Why, we even put an open Starbucks in the Elfin Lodge. But apparently that isn't enough. They now want more paid time off. They already get three months, February through April. With that we are just barely able to make production quotas by the delivery

date. I give them any more time off, we are through. I do think the kids are getting bad, but I almost think the elves are getting worse. I just don't know what to do, a union will crush me."

"It's about emotional needs. It's about you!" Santa looked deep into Mrs. Claus eyes, tears welling up in his own eyes. "How long has it been since we have been on a date? Sure we have meals together often enough, but really, when was the last time we went out somewhere? When was the last time we went for a walk, hand in hand, along a mountain trail or on a sandy beach? Can you recall the last sunset, or sunrise, we enjoyed together? When was the last time we simply sat home at night and watched a movie, just the two of us? When was the last time we talked, really talked, about anything, everything?" Santa shifted and stared at the floor the longest minute, slowly shaking his head. "It has been so many years, I have almost forgotten." He looked up at his wife with pleading eyes. "I am so busy throughout the year, all the responsibilities and all the demands, I don't find time for you, for us. I miss you," he said. A single tear streaked down his rosy cheek. He quickly wiped it away. "No, it goes much deeper than the weather."

The two sat in deafening silence for what seemed a millennium. Finally, Mrs. Claus spoke. "So, what are you going to do? The elves are still working on the sleigh and the reindeer are taking in extra carbs for the long trip. Can we not go this one last time? Everything is ready."

"I gave my body, my heart, my mind, and my soul. I sacrificed so much. And for what? I am forgotten, ignored, and denied. I know there are some who believe, and I acknowledge that there are some who appreciate the gift. But, do any of them truly understand the cost? I think the time has come to bring it all to an end. It is finished."

Mrs. Claus asked, "What will become of the reindeer, the elves? The elves will be so disappointed."

"The reindeer can be..., well, they can be reindeer and the elves will be fine. We will continue to make toys, just without all the timelines and all the pressure. Like everyone else we will go commercial. We will rebrand, call our wares, "Just Beclaus Toys and Games". I have some contacts at Amazon and Walmart, I'm sure I can get our products on the shelves. Then, there's always Macy's. For those with fewer resources we will continue to drop large shipments at thrift stores. The people will have to buy the merchandise but at least there will be a reasonable selection of quality goods. Hopefully the thrift stores won't gouge too much. The elves will still have something to do and to a degree we will all still make a difference."

"Well, that's it then, sounds like you thought this through." Mrs. Claus rose from her knees, kissed Santa on the forehead, and started for the door. "I will go tell the elves," she said sadly. She opened the door and stepped through. Before closing, she turned and said, "I guess Christmas will never again be what it used to be, will it?" A single tear streaked down Santa's rosy cheek, this one he just let go.

Jesus, the creator and savior of the world, watching all this unfold from his throne above whispered softly, "Oh, my dear friends. I know just how you feel. It used to be my birthday."