

Santa's Simple Gift of Faith



*A Short Story By
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**SANTA'S SIMPLE
GIFT OF FAITH**

OMG, Taylor, Santa IS Real!!

**A Yuletide Tale by
Thomas DiCarlo and Connie D Atkinson**

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If you don't believe, you won't receive!" Ten year old Rebecca beamed her favorite Christmas-time slogan at her twelve-year old sister, Taylor, who had just expressed doubts about the existence of jolly ole' Saint Nick. "How can he possibly go to every house in the whole world in one night," Taylor argued. "Besides, Blake told me the truth; our parents buy all our toys."

Blake was the Patterson's eldest. He was fourteen years old, tall for his age, with sparkling eyes, the color of a clear winter sky, and hair black as a beetle's wing. He had foregone most of the usual trappings of adolescent angst, too busy with school work, sports, and friends. His premature skepticism came from trying to don the mantle of his father's tendency to be practical and realistic.

The family had awoken to a classic New England Christmas Eve morning. The sun rose over a fresh blanket of snow that covered the browns and deep greens of earth and evergreens. The early morning rays lit up the newly-white face of the frozen landscape with a warm glow that seemed to rise from within every leaf and rock. The silence was beautiful and complete, the sounds of the nearby highway absent in a way that only happens when the snow falls.

Ice crystals hanging from tree limbs reflected their light back into the windows of the Patterson residence. The curtains had been flung open at the crack of dawn as the household prepared for the honored guests they would be receiving in just a few short hours. The finishing touches were being lovingly placed onto the tree, the delicately wrapped presents scattered beneath, and warm smells of the last Christmas cookies rose from the kitchen and filled the house with the scent of cinnamon and vanilla.

Mother, father, grandmother, and children – two sisters and a brother – were in happy anticipation of the wonderful gatherings they would soon be sharing with their closest relatives, neighbors, and friends over the next two days. It was family tradition and it was the best way they knew to celebrate the birth of Jesus and the charity and good cheer of the season. Every family member gave his or her own special measure of love and service as they went about with great joy in their hearts.

Rebecca, holding tightly to that wonderful quality of unbridled childhood joy, simply shrugged off any doubts about the magic surrounding her favorite holiday. Glancing up at the Christmas tree in the living room, the sparkle in her eyes aglow like the sparkle of the crystal ornaments, it didn't matter what her sister said; she remained undaunted. Rebecca kept repeating her slogan until the girls finally dropped the topic and resumed playing with the toys they had scattered across the carpet.

Matthew Patterson sat in the family room listening to the girls' banter. He lit a fire and shadows from the logs burning in the fireplace marched across the oak paneled walls of the room. Matt had dreaded this cringe-worthy moment as does most every parent. This was the first rite of passage, he thought. That first step away from innocence when you learn the truth about Santa. If he could have one holiday wish it would be to gather his children tight in his arms and protect them from the world forever. But he knew this could never be, for we all must grow up. Still, he hoped that Rebecca wouldn't ask the "Dad, is Santa real?" question until next year or perhaps, if he was really lucky, the year after that.

As Matthew sat there hoping and wishing, he remembered the first time he was told Santa wasn't real. It was a week before Christmas and Mr. Mc Lamore, his third grade teacher, announced to the class there was no Santa Clause, laying out in full detail the unvarnished truth for the children. It was not

the teacher's intent to harm; merely to quiet his distracted class from chattering away about their Christmas lists. But harm it did do. Despite the parent uprising that placed the teacher in a thoroughly compromised position, and the adults promising Santa *was* indeed real; little Matthew never quite looked at the pile of gifts under the tree the same way again. "Magical thinking is such a precious gift," he said whispering to the dog sleeping beside him on the sofa.

Matthew decided to find his wife and confide to her his concerns. Jane would know what to say. He first stopped to watch the children play, marveling at the way they invented their own games. He shook his head and muttered under his breath again, "Why are we so quick to give this up?"

"What daddy?" asked Rebecca.

"Nothing important sweetheart...are you girls having a good time?"

"Yes!" they chirped together in a grand gesture of youthful enthusiasm.

Matthew left them to their games and climbed the staircase in the center hall. He found his wife behind the locked door of the master bedroom, hard at work wrapping the kids' presents. He knocked softly and waited. Soon he heard a soft click as his wife unlocked the door and opened it a crack. She grinned to see her husband and reached out a hand to pull him in, quickly shutting the door behind them again.

Matthew let out a little gasp as he saw the mile high pile of gifts for family and friends sitting on the bed. The pile was just about an arm's length from hitting the ceiling fan. Jane sat back down on the floor, lotus style, and returned to a gift that was nearly complete save for the finishing touch – a huge bow of silvery perfection. Each loop pulled tight with the graceful tips of her fingers was punctuated by a little puff of breath escaping

her bottom lip that blew back a dark strand of hair as it fell into her face. Jane wore an expression of intense concentration, the end product of the requisite effort to ensure every gift was unique and personal. At that moment all seemed right with the world and Matthew knew how lucky he was to have found his wife when he did – at a time when, after a series of sometimes sad endings, he was feeling as though it was not his destiny to ever find a life partner.

Jane met Matthew at a youth conference held by their local church. They were both youth counselors, giving as much time as they could afford from their busy careers to guide the youth in their community to navigate adolescence with a vision of the talents they could tap within themselves that would eventually serve them, their families, and their communities. Matthew never quite understood the antipathy toward organized religion he saw in the culture around him. He had grown up experiencing the positive benefits to members of his church who had been nurtured in organized groups of charitable endeavors that gave back to their communities as well as raising money to help needy families all over the world.

Matthew fell in love with Jane on first sight. She was the most effervescent and passionate woman he had ever seen and she clearly loved the youngsters in her group with all her heart. He thought she would make a wonderful wife and mother and he was right. His own mother, battling the final stages of the cancer that would take her life, told him that the best way to get to know a potential partner was to work together and see how the person responded under pressure. “Test the character; marriage requires it,” she would say. Youth group leadership turned out to be a great testing ground for the couple. They worked well together. The youth were challenging and Jane took it all in stride. This time, Matthew followed his mom’s advice. The couple dated for a year and were married the year after that.

Matthew's mother certainly knew what she was talking about. Jane brought to her family the same energy, creativity, and enthusiasm that she brought to her schoolwork, her career, to her youth group and, now, to her husband and children. Matthew wasn't positive there was such a thing as a perfect soul mate, but Jane was certainly perfect for him.

"Taylor is arguing with Becky," Matthew told his wife.

"What now?" asked Jane without looking up.

"Taylor is trying to convince our youngest daughter that Santa Clause does not exist. Becky is trying to resist but I wonder how long that will last. I don't think I am ready for this," he sighed.

Jane looked up at her husband and saw the wistful expression gathering on his face.

She stopped what she was doing and rose to her feet. Taking her husband's hand in hers, Jane said, "I know exactly how you feel, Matt. We have to let them grow up and yet it is sad to see such a lovely bit of childhood faith die to adolescence. Santa is one of those miracles that should exist, whether you believe in him or not. It's a miracle, in itself, when a child grows up with her faith in Santa intact. Cheer up, honey. Maybe, God willing, we will get our Christmas miracle."

A few short hours later, the house perfect and smelling of all those wonderful Christmas aromas, the Patterson family was together at the front door welcoming their first Christmas Eve guests.

It's as certain as any tradition you can name that every year the Patterson's will hold their annual Christmas Eve party. Christmas day is reserved for immediate and extended family but the night before is a gala affair for their closest friends. Everyone

is encouraged to express their Christmas spirit by wearing their most festive Christmas attire.

Cocktails and hors d'oeuvres are at six o'clock sharp but Matthew expected his closest friend, Kevin Seifert, to show about an hour later, with family in tow, all looking like they just blew in from the North Pole. Kevin dressed in a hand-tailored Santa costume, his wife Sue dressed as Mrs. Clause and his son and daughter as Santa's elves. Every year they entered to a chorus of jingling sleigh bells and hardy ho, ho, ho's to the delight of both the children and adults at the party. After the toy sack was emptied and the children ran off to unwrap 'Santa's' gifts, the Seiferts would change clothes, reverting back to their regular mortal identities before rejoining the merry celebration.

Kevin was a successful businessman and active in the community where he served on the board of a local hospital. Since the very beginning of his career, Kevin felt a strong need to give back some of the good fortune of which he had been blessed. This continued through his marriage to Sue and the birth of his children, who were impressed into their father's charitable activities. Matthew and Kevin's oldest daughters had grown up together and were best friends, now in their mid teens. The two men, along with their wives, often discussed raising kids in a complex global culture that had become as close as the nearest laptop or portable internet-connected device.

Dinner was a raucous and sumptuous affair, everyone at the table finding the good food and the good conversation just right for a Christmas Eve remembrance. After dinner, Matthew and Kevin wandered into the family room to throw a few fresh logs onto the fire. Kevin noticed his friend had become quiet. He could tell something was on his mind, so he asked, "Hey, what's troubling you tonight? Worried you're on the naughty list?"

Matthew, looking at the flames through the amber colored liquor in his glass, smiled, "Nah, I'm in good with the

North Pole crowd. No...it's Becky. She's the youngest of all our kids and I think she's about to pop the fateful Christmas question."

What's Jane's take on all this?"

"Well, she certainly understands how I feel but she didn't tell me how to handle it. If Becky asks straight out I guess I should come clean. I just hate the thought of it though. She's the youngest...no more after her. Say, how'd you deal with this when your kids asked? When did you tell them?"

Kevin motioned for his friend to sit. "You know we come late every year because we go to the hospital first and bring presents to the kids in the pediatric ward. My kids have been coming with us since they were toddlers. I found out last year that they knew for a while but now, they believe. Trust me on this!"

"Really, so tell me...why?"

"Well, remember last year, we had that heavy snow...we almost decided not to brave the roads but the kids said if Sue and I were going to make them dress like elves then it was only fair that we try to make it to the hospital. So we went. When we walked into the ward it was the usual thing, all of the children, it didn't matter how sick, every face all lit up with excitement. One by one, we went to each bed, giving out gifts, talking to each child, singing with each child, laughing with each child. But the gifts we got from them, in the form of the joy and delight they each expressed, were immeasurable and I could see it in the eyes of my own children. Funny how, in giving, we always seem to get back a heap more than we gave.

Matthew nodded in agreement. He waited for his friend to continue.

“As we worked our way down the ward we came upon a man and woman in the far corner hovering over a very sick little boy. The child was asleep in bed. His stillness was complete and palpable and, to tell the truth, I had reservations about going over there. But as we approached the man’s face brightened with joy and tears pooled in his eyes. His wife beamed up at me. There is no more genuine smile than the one you see when you have reached out to a mother’s sick child. I said hello and wished them both a merry Christmas but they did not reply; they just nodded and smiled. I soon realized that they didn’t speak a word of English.

“By the time I reached the child’s bedside, his father had picked him up and awakened him. I took a gift from my sack and offered it to the boy. The boy rubbed his eyes and hid his face in his father’s chest. His dad whispered something to him I did not understand. All of a sudden the little boy reached up and took the present. He smiled at me and tried to hold on to it but his arms were too weak and his father had to take it from him and put it down. The child would not take his eyes off the gift and I wondered whether I should open it for him. Then his mother started crying, her shoulders trembling slightly, and the child’s father came and hugged me tightly. One by one, he embraced Sue and my kids and kept repeating a word that I think meant ‘thank you’. He tried to put the child in my arms but I felt a little nervous about holding him. Sue stepped in and took the little boy in her arms and began to sing. The little boy smiled and put his head on her shoulder; a huge grin lighting up his face.

“When we were leaving the hospital the man followed us. In the lobby he took hold of my hand and kept saying something over and over. After several moments I squeezed his shoulder, in a kind of sign of understanding between two men with sons. The joy and solace on his face held Sue and the kids spellbound. Then I wished him a ‘Merry Christmas’ and we

turned to leave. A passing nurse told me he had asked God to send us great blessings.

As we drove away I said to my kids, 'Santa sure had a good night tonight.' There was no immediate reaction so I added, 'Hope you guys were good this year; guess we'll find out tomorrow morning.' There still was no answer so I reprised, 'Tomorrow's the big day, hope you guys were good all year. I could see wry grins in the rearview mirror as Sara and Stephen looked at each other and rolled their eyes. 'Am I missing something?' I asked them.

"Stephen replied, 'It's ok, dad, we know.' He said it in a sort of sheepish way as though he was concerned about hurting my feelings.

"What is it you think you know?" I asked.

"That Santa isn't real,' Sara insisted. Then she added, 'Don't worry dad, its fine, we just grew up but we still love Christmas.'

"Well...did you two guys happen to notice the man and woman with the very sick boy who followed us out?"

"Sure dad,' both answered.

"Do you think Santa is real to him?"

"The kids were silent for most of the ride over here...just thinking, I guess, because as we pulled up in front of your house, they both agreed that Santa was indeed real."

Jane's muffled voice could be heard calling the guests to the dining room for dessert. Matthew and Kevin rose and took their places at the table.

It was nearly midnight and, as was their Christmas Eve custom, Matthew and the children read verses from Luke's gospel so everyone could reflect on the message proclaimed by

the angels. Over coffee, dessert and cordials, the adults engaged in lively conversations while the children played beside the Christmas tree.

Matthew was discussing a news item with a colleague when he noticed Rebecca standing next to him sulking.

“What’s wrong honey?”

“Blake said that Santa isn’t real. Is Santa real daddy?”

Matthew Patterson lifted his daughter onto his lap as the dining room fell silent. His eyes met Kevin’s, then Jane’s, then Sue’s. He looked at his daughter and said, “Yes, Becky...Santa is real as can be. He lives in every loving heart.”