

# That Old Santa Hat



By  
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## Chapter 1

I didn't know where to start. Christmas season was coming. Decorations to adorn, stories to tell, presents to buy. But I didn't know where to start. I looked at the Santa suit hanging in the hall closet. A smile crossed my lips as the good memories gained in that outfit filtered through my mind. I saw the old Santa hat hanging on the hook and knew I would be donning it soon for the Christmas Season.

The Christmas Season. Boy it was going to be different this year. Last year was bad. But this year with my wife's illness, I knew it would be worse. It was a difficult year. My wife disappeared in early January. I say my wife disappeared because although her body remained the habits, thoughts, and little quirks that made her my wife, my love, was no longer there. While her body remained, the insidious disease that took her mind grew and mocked me. We had made arrangements for her passing. That wouldn't be an issue. I was now the caregiver and guardian ensuring that her wish, that she stay in her home however long that took, was carried out. So far, it was another 11 months and counting. Tough going from a husband to a caregiver.



Whoever said this disease was a long goodbye, lied. They sugar-coated the hell out of that description. This crap ain't easy and sentimental. Bitch is hard. I can understand the description though. Helps those on the outside looking in. Makes it easier for them to deal with the awkwardness, the persistent march to the end. Still, I wouldn't wish this on anyone. Not even my most hated enemy and I had a few.



I think I am supposed to be happy she made it another year. Truth is, I am. I am in no way ready to say goodbye. I stand with her. She fights. If some miracle comes our way, we're ready. I want her back. But it is difficult watching the decline, taking care of her needs. I do get tired, stressed, exhausted.

Still, this Christmas is different. A lot in some ways. Makes me realize that Christmas is meant to be shared. I always knew it was. But that was before. Before when she smiled as she dug out her Christmas dishes, glasses, and silverware or in truth I dug them out as she directed. Before when we used to choose the tree together and decorate it. Now she doesn't even know it is time to choose a tree let alone know how to decorate it. Most of the Christmas dishes remain in the cupboards.



The season and the times made me think about the passing of the last year. So many emotions and frustrations. We fought the medical community and the state for help and care. It was not often given and if it was it was grudging. Next were the various companies, bureaucracies and people that demanded recompense, justifications, or just preyed upon the sick and disabled. I wondered if any even comprehended how little their jobs, goals, and dreams mattered to us. They mattered no more than a knot on a dog. Their forms, interviews, and repeated entreaties were so much fodder in our lives. Necessary only in the need for use of their limited or reserved services so we could carry on in some form of dignity.

Good people though did come through. Phone calls and conversations with a few friends. Professionals that knew their job was more than the occasional visit. It softened the burden.



Then there were the historical events that happened. My wife's life was seemingly bookended in the struggle for women's equality. Never more so than the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. My wife had borne the burden of marching in the streets for equal rights, the right of abortion, to have mastery over her own body and finances. She had come of age and reveled when that right was affirmed. When she was able to achieve her own financial independence, she rejoiced again. Now, in her failing health, she was witnessing her, and her sisters' efforts being dashed and broken against the rocks of judicial prejudice and conservative ideology. And she noticed. Even in her deteriorating state she noticed. It was such a prominent part of her life I shouldn't have doubted she would.



A self-righteous jurist and his four merry accomplices looked upon abortion as only a contraceptive device and deemed it unprotected. While declaring conception of life undefinable, they allowed each state to individually define it. In this process they destroyed the fundamental rights of over half of the population of the country. My wife in her waning lucidity understood what was happening. She made me promise to help her vote, make her vote this year, no matter what. She had to have her say in what she thought was settled. I promised.

Then we watched, as her mind continued to falter, the unfolding of hearing against a former president. Hearings that proved to us, to her, that he had tried to launch an insurrection against our country just for his ego. We watched as his vanity could not accept his tag of 'loser'. How his lust for power was second only to his need for affirmation and both, to him, were more important than country. Our country. The one we worked and sweated to carry to greater heights. The country we invested our lives and souls.



She, or what was left of her mind, began even more to falter. She became obsessed with the elections, the hearings, and current events. She could only watch the news. All else took second place. When she could gather a thought and express it. She worried for women's rights and the future of our country. She hoped her fellow citizens would reject this madness and return her country.

Even in her depressed and fading state she wanted to vote. She couldn't write. She could barely express her opinions. She could almost point and nod. But she wanted to vote. I promised, so she voted. It was what I could do. But even then, we had to go to the elections office and have her 'make a mark' so she could have her ballot accepted. I still remember taking her hand, guiding her into the office. I remember taking her damn dog in with us so she would not be upset or scared. It was like watching someone in a fog. But the ballot was signed and accepted.



I took her home. Her stress alleviated just a bit. I looked for satisfaction and realization on her face at her accomplishment of voting. She just stared into the distance. She didn't even seem to know she had voted one last time for her causes. We stopped for a chocolate shake. The smile as she slurped it through the straw the only emotional reaction to the day. My pledge unnoticed. Her victory unmarked. I sighed.

The next month Halloween came. She didn't even know. One of her favorite holidays and she didn't know. She instead watched her television news and waited for my reactions to see if it was good or bad news. On election night I got the popcorn and coke out. I put together our little election night tradition. She stared blankly at the screen but smiled as her mind felt the familiar. As her choices succeeded I high fived her. I realized in the comfort





of my smile she was finding victory in her mind. But she, the woman I loved was only there now in muscle memory and fond feelings. It was still 11 months and counting.

So now Thanksgiving and the Christmas season was upon us. No turkey. She wouldn't eat it anyway. No guests. No family. Some homemade chili. More for me than her. Easier to make and easier for her to swallow. Did break out the chocolate chip cookies. A memory made her smile as she ate a couple. We watched some favorite Christmas movies and some new ones. Then off to bed, cats and dog gathering around and barely leaving me a spot on the bed.

I lay there and asked what next to the dark. I was getting too old and fat. Much of what I did do for Christmas I couldn't anymore. I knew she cared about Christmas, but she didn't even know it was coming. She couldn't shop, decorate, or participate really. I remembered thinking last Christmas that that could be the last one with her. But here we were, 11 months and counting. She might be here next Christmas as well. Or I might celebrate alone. It was time to make changes. I would have Christmas, but how?





## Chapter 2

I did realize you could always share Christmas. Maybe not with those you have but you can share with others, even with yourself. Christmas to me has always been a spiritual time. Oh, I don't celebrate Christ's birthday. Anyone with any intelligence already knows that if a Christ was born it wasn't on December 25<sup>th</sup>. But I do celebrate the idea, the thought, the spirit. It is a holy concept if there ever was one created by man.

I decided to start sharing Christmas with me first. I couldn't do all I wanted. But I could do all I could.

A tree? Yes. Some outdoor decorations. Yes, those easy laser ones I could push into the front lawn and point towards the house. Even some outside Christmas music. I could do that with my outdoor speakers. Outside Christmas, done. Not quickly. Took more than a couple of days. But done. Not a competition entry, but Christmas just the same. She could even come outside and smile at the pretty lights.



Inside would be the tree of course and the calendar. The calendar. It was a raggedy old piece of cloth purchased years ago when our youngest couldn't tell time. It had 24 pockets, and you moved a small mouse to each pocket to count off the days till Christmas. Helped the boy understand days and time. Helped him to quit constantly asking if it was Christmas yet. Saved our sanity.

That memory brought back another one. The first Christmas together. God we were so young. I was twenty. She was nineteen. We lived in a one bedroom third floor walk-up without a balcony next to the river. A whole \$150.00 a month as I recall. We





were merging our Christmases. What she expected and what I expected. Trying to make our own traditions.

She was confused as I brought in a tree, decorations and placed a present under it. She wanted to know what the present was. How did I know what she wanted? I look confused back at her. I told her it was a surprise not to be opened until Christmas morning, after 'Santa' arrived. Turned out her Christmases had been a whole lot different than mine. Her family had the tree of course. But the presents were usually only one main item and a couple of side gifts. The main item was something they told their mom and dad they wanted. Then her parents went out and bought it and placed it next to the tree. They couldn't use it till Christmas morning, but essentially, they knew what their Christmas gift was before Christmas morning.

Well, she was in for a surprise. I explained that we bought Christmas gifts almost all season and never revealed what we bought the others until Christmas morning. There would be piles of Christmas gifts and a surprise in each one, plus the stockings. She was amazed, but on board. As a present showed up frequently and the pile grew, she became more anxious with each passing day. I remember our first Christmas morning. She giggled with excitement and plopped herself down on the floor. She ripped off the paper and tore open the boxes. There was such silly joy.

Then I gave her the Christmas stocking. Her very own stocking filled with fruits and candy with a small present at the bottom. She ate the chocolate opened the present and smiled. She asked me how I knew what to give her for Christmas. I told her I just listened and observed. The key was to give a present that was totally not needed but wanted. If you need something, you don't wait for Christmas to get it. You just go get it. But you may want something





that is just nuts, like a drum set. But because it is wanted not needed you would never get it. That was what Christmas was about, receiving what was wanted. That created joy, happiness, and laughter. It wasn't important if the gift was never used. It was important that you listened enough to know that it was wanted.

She was in after that Christmas. Well, especially after we went to my family's house for Christmas. Goodness, she had never seen such a stack of presents and such a large tree. The stereo blared Christmas music. The turkey was at least 23lbs and there were presents for her from mom, dad, and all my siblings. She fell asleep in my arms that night exhausted but happy and totally into a 'Santa' Christmas.

The thought of her mother entered my mind as memories started to flow. Her mom was notorious for secretly opening Christmas presents, then re-wrapping them. She couldn't stand waiting and wanted to know what she was getting. Her proudest moments were declaring what she got before she opened each present on Christmas morning. In her mind it thus proclaimed her cleverer than all, I supposed.



But one day before Christmas I placed a present to her mother under the tree. Her mother saw and fairly shook with excitement and anticipation. My wife told me that she would know before Christmas what was in the present. Without looking up I just informed her mother and her that if that ever happened, I would take the present back. In fact, I said, if the present were moved before Christmas the same would happen. I wouldn't want anyone 'shaking' the present to try to figure out what was in it. It was a violation of the 'Christmas Rules'.

Her mother looked at me as if I was kidding. I just held a firm look back at her. My wife with a sly smile confirmed that I



would do as I said. Christmas was sacred to me. Her mother was crestfallen. She never again knew what she was getting until Christmas morning. But the thrill on her mother's face on those Christmas mornings were memorable.

I remember when we gave her a Christmas stocking, her first actually. It was a number of years in our marriage. Her mother was a grandma now. Grandma and Grandpa were staying at our house for Christmas. They would be there Christmas morning when the grandkids opened their presents. It was glorious and fun. Grandma and Grandpa sat in their chairs and watched all the excitement. They even got their own presents, of course. But, as always, in our house the final gifts were the stockings filled with favorite candies and small gifts. The names of each recipient were stitched onto each stocking. The kids first, then the grandparents. We would be last. I handed the stocking to Grandma.

She looked at it. A tear fell from her eye. She got up from the chair and held the stocking tightly to her chest. Then she quickly headed up to her room. I looked at Grandpa. He just smiled and let us know it was the first stocking she had ever had. Her name on it made it all the more special.

We had so many fine Christmases together. Some with a lot less to give, others with much more. But we always had Christmas. Santa always came to our house. Presents were never opened until Christmas morning. Stockings were always filled. It meant many a Christmas Eve wrapping presents carried in from the cold well into the wee hours of Christmas morning. But once my wife was in, she was all in. I had created a monster.



I remember one Christmas she wanted to get the boys everything on their lists. Now this was a task as the boys were into San-



ta as well. Their lists were long and expensive. We usually got about halfway through before giving up due to time and money. But this year was different. The youngest had a long list. But the oldest just turned 16. He only wanted one thing, a car. Not a toy car. A real drivable car to go with his new driver's license.

Well, I found a good used car. She went hog wild and found all the young one's presents. I had a good year that year, but we probably spent all we gained on that Christmas. Still, it was magical. Christmas came and the boys ran down the stairs to the tree. The young one tore threw his mountain of presents. Meanwhile the oldest sat and opened a couple of distraction presents and smiled faintly if not sullenly in the chair. He had already sneaked a peek out into the driveway. No new car was present. Finally, after all the young one's presents were picked and opened, I handed him a small envelope.

Inside were a set of car keys. His eyes lit up and his excitement exploded. But he didn't know where the car was. I suggested he go outside and look under the window of his second-floor room. He jumped into some old shoes and ran out the front door in his pj's. I followed closely in a pair of good boots and a warm coat against the snow fall. I turned the corner in time to see him throw the large bow covered in snow from atop the car and climb in.



That boy sat in that car all Christmas. Muttering quite frequently that he couldn't believe he had slept all night with the car literally next to him. I remember he wanted to stay in that car. But he didn't want to run out of gas. He strung an electric cord from the garage to the car he had now parked in the street. He then put a



heater in the back seat. The only time we saw him that day was at the Christmas meal and when he had to use the bathroom. He sat with his boys in that car all day making dreams for the future. It was a good Christmas. And the young one got all he wanted as well.

I sat and I thought. There were so many good memories of Christmas. I could spend days writing them down. After all, she and I had been together 50 years, 48 of them married. Now the fifty first was upon us. Her body was here. If you talked about the past Christmases, she even appeared occasionally. But this year she would be here in body, but not mind. I needed a Christmas. I needed to share.





## Chapter 3

I went to the closet and found my Santa suit again. That was a memory in itself. Over thirty years ago one of my employees asked me to play Santa for their Girl Scout group. Their suit didn't quite fit my girth, so I went to the local costume shop and bought one, best they had. Anyway, it was a hit, and the suit was too good to toss. So, I kept it. From that point on every year in some fashion or other I played Santa.

I was fit for the job. Always had too big a stomach and with natural white hair wasn't too tough to look like the old man. Funny though. Nothing ever said Santa like the old Santa hat that came with the suit. I wore that hat with the suit and without. Always got a smile, jolly laugh, or the bug-eyed look of some toddler. When I got older and sported a long white beard year-round it was even more common. Put on the Santa hat get called and treated like Santa. Just the way it was. I became inured to it. But I also loved it.

I am sure I got more from playing Santa than I ever gave. The raucous child in line at the local Wal-Mart becoming quite and shy when he saw me around his mother's form. The developmentally disabled teenage girl that ran and threw her arms around me in the middle of a store. She screamed and cried in happiness. Her family was mortified, apologetic until I turned, smiled, and hugged her back. The child's joy and the parents' tears as they took photo's, all the payment I would ever need. The thirty something daughter that recently lost her Santa Dad who cried and held me in the fresh fruit section. The feeling as I prayed with her. But in







each of those times I wore nothing more holiday than the old Santa hat.

I pulled the Santa suit out and reached for the Santa hat. It was still in pretty good shape. Quite remarkable for a piece of a costume more than 30 years old. My hand and fingers grazed the whitened fur. I brushed the red velvet. Then I made sure the white bulb on top was secure. I looked at it closely. Then I put it on my head.

A chuckle came out. A chuckle from me. In all my despair and pessimistic feelings, I chuckled. Then I smiled. My body felt warm. I could feel happiness come up, tingling, from my toes. I felt snugly. I looked in a mirror. Santa looked back. A sadness filled his eyes, but the twinkle was still there, strong and forgiving. I decided to wear the hat to my luncheon with my friend.



As I entered the luncheonette, glum looks turned to smiles. Harried waitresses had a moment to look and grin. What was supposed to be a wait found me quickly seated. I was smiling and waving at strangers. They were waving back. My friend showed up and just laughed. A smile broke across her face and her recent troubles seemed minor. I spoke with staff, managers, and patrons. I gave a hug and peck on the cheek. Patrons two tables over made their way by me to just laugh and be happy. All with just that old Santa hat perched on my head. No costume. No jingle bells. No special costume. Just the old Santa hat.

I finished my lunch. Said my goodbyes and headed back home all the while wearing that old Santa hat. As I drove, better thoughts entered my mind. I realized I was fighting against the loss that professionals said would come. I didn't want to end this story. I was in denial even hate. But just as I did fifty-one years ago, I needed to merge my Christmases. The ones in the past and the ones yet



to come. I needed to keep some traditions, store the memories, and prepare for a new adventure. It might not be the adventures I was hoping and planning to spend with my wife. But if the professionals were right, it was one that was to be. One that I may live for many more years. I should get ready.

With the hat firmly attached, I started making a list. I had always wanted some things and never got them. Cost, lack of money and well just life got in the way. I mean Santa boots. I always wanted Santa boots. The whole time I had my costume I never had the



boots, just some costume fakes. I even hinted strongly that Christmas boots would be a great Christmas gift. No boots. This year. Boots. Oh, baby I got the good ones from the Santa store. Didn't really have the money. But I found it. Yes!

What else? The list took shape. Poinsettias. I always bought some. I liked them. But now I wanted more. They went on the list. Santa shirt? Santa robe? Artificial tree for outdoors? Gazebo? Yes. Yes. And yes. I just put everything on the list. What would I like my future Christmases to be like? After an hour of grins and laughter. I had such a list.

Then I took a drink. Rubbed a much too large belly and creaked as I moved the chair. No, the chair didn't creak. I did. Age had taken its toll. I knew that. I just couldn't physically do all that I wanted. Nor would I want to spend days and hours putting it all together. People were who I wanted to be with, to share with, not things. With a smile and an understanding of age more than a few items were crossed off. A couple were circled as 'maybes'. But not so few were left on the list.



Travel was a big one on the list. Not only because I wanted to experience Christmas in other places, but because we both wanted to travel during the season. I could honor that memory and make it part of my future. The thought made me melancholy. I really wished we could travel now. She was physically here. But her condition made it impossible. Not only couldn't she travel. She wouldn't know what we were seeing. Seeing it for her though, later, that I could do. I would do.

Keeping a live tree for Christmas. That was a memory and remembrance. A merging of past Christmases and future ones.



Stockings always would be a part of Christmas, for family here or those passed on. That merged past and future as well. Preparing for a Christmas Day alone. That was tough, but doable. I always wanted to go to the theater, movie and otherwise. I wanted to dine out if possible. If not, dine in with decadent meals I wasn't supposed to eat. Also spending time just reading and a bit more quiet time just in contemplation.

I never had enough time to remember, feel, think, and just be. There was always some entertainment to be or do. It would be nice to have time, on that day of peace, for myself.

Of course, there was also the grandchild. Some hugs, looking at Christmas lights, eating fudge and cookies, just being together would be nice. A day or two with the boys. Sharing some memories and making new ones.

As I made the list, I began to realize that there was a new Christmas possible while not forgetting the old. A merging of Christmases just like before, fifty-one years ago. Still there was a Christmas to live now. The future wasn't here yet thankfully. What did that mean for now? How do I handle the transition?



My head itched and I removed the old Santa hat to scratch the itch. The good feelings began to fade. The list on my desk looked sad, not hopeful. The reminder on my watch told me it was time to give her some more pills. I stood up and grabbed the medicine and went into the living room. She sat there petting the dog and staring blankly at some inane television show. It was obvious she had no idea what was on. Another piece of my heart broke. I handed her the pills and she looked up. A smile and giggle came forth.

“Only one!” She was so happy she only had to take one pill this time. Small victory but a victory, nonetheless. I smiled at her joy and nodded in the affirmative. She could still so easily get to my heart. My future planned. The past remembered. How was I going to handle the present?





## Chapter 4

I grabbed the Santa hat on the way out to exercise the next morning. More of a habit than a thought it was muscle memory. I slipped it on, and the warmth filled my body once more. 'Thought of Christmas present filled my mind. I suddenly realized that yes, were at 11 months and counting. But we were still counting! That was what was important. So many things could happen. Miracles and hope were not dead. Faint possibilities, but not dead. I smiled. If I could only have her in snippets or just in body. I at least still had something. So how to do Christmas?

No grand gestures. She wouldn't and couldn't understand them. No memorials. Same reasons plus it would be morbid. Buying gifts was next to impossible. There would be some. But the go to gifts of clothes, gadgets, and jewelry were out. Things just didn't interest her. She couldn't even answer a cell phone anymore. Gadgets and doodads just sit like doorstops she didn't remember having.

I couldn't travel to the Alps for Christmas, but we could travel the neighborhood. She still loved looking at the Christmas lights. Never got old for her. Maybe a trip or two before Christmas and a grand one Christmas Eve? Of course, I would be wearing the Santa hat.



Sitting with her. Being with her. That helped. She still liked sitting with me. I could read to her or just talk. She still enjoyed having me just talk with her. She never said anything, but it calmed her down and made her happy. I would even do it with the Santa hat on.



She still enjoyed chocolate. Milk chocolate, chocolate chip cookies, hot chocolate, chocolate cake she still dove into. Lordy, I could bake. Loved doing that. Plus, I could make Christmas cookies. She loves eating the icing. Some of her favourite foods as well. She still loves takeout. A few more days wouldn't break the bank. It was difficult thinking up presents. But with creativity and a some brainstorming it could be pulled off.



Of course, what she would really like would be for her sons, their mates, and granddaughter to show up during Christmas. Christmas Eve or Christmas Day would be wonderful. But that was such a remote possibility. All of them lived four states over and suffered the same cash flow drama as more than ninety percent of the country. Both boys were aware of the tragedy playing out at home. They regularly called in via video or just by phone to keep in touch with their mama. They both wanted a moment or two with their mama in person. But they also it knew it couldn't be more than a moment or two. Their mom just wasn't really there anymore. Still, it was a cost they were willing to pay, just not a payment they could afford.

I knew the stress this was putting on them. I didn't hold any sadness or animosity for their decisions. I had to make similar ones not to long ago for my mother and father. I didn't even have video streaming to help. It tore at your soul. How do you balance your love for your father and mother against the lives of the family you literally created? This was the agony of this disease. If their mom were close to death. If the diagnosis provided a time range of life left. Plans could be made, budgets set, vacation days used. But this disease provided no such evidence. We were 11 months and counting. We could easily be 23 months and counting next year with only





a progressive discernable loss of cognitive ability. Or we could lose the count in a matter of weeks. The illness just prohibited regular interaction by those not living close by.

Considering the setbacks to personal interaction, video would be on the Christmas list of presents. Videos with her sons and granddaughter as they had their Christmas day meal. I would make sure she had on something festive for the call. Maybe even her old elves hat. We could all at least get a laugh and a smile.

Of course, the stocking had to be planned. Mostly her favorite chocolates. But this year a small box stuffed with scratch off lottery tickets.



She still knew those and loved scratching them off. Never knew if she won or not, but she always giggled in anticipation. It would be a bit of fun for the day.

I'd make a small quick meal. First of all, she didn't really eat that much anymore. Chocolate chip cookies for her and Santa would still be on the menu. I mean we really believe in Santa at our house. Not only because I look like him and often portray him at the local stores. But because we have seen the small miracles.

I remembered one even as I thought of them. Someone working for us many years ago had all of her Christmas money stolen from her purse as she shopped. Well, we had a good year, so we placed about half of what she lost in a new purse and wrapped it up. We gave it to her for a present. To say she was grateful was an understatement. We were embarrassed a bit at her and her family's response. But that wasn't the small miracle.

That came years later. My wife had placed all of our presents in the trunk of her car. She locked them and the car up and went to bed. The next day she discovered someone had broken into the car and stolen everything, all of the family gifts. She was devastated. It



was only weeks before Christmas and we had no way of recovering from the loss. But strangely enough, just as we had done years earlier. Her friends at her place of work found out about her loss. With anonymity of the givers preserved, she found numerous gift cards and cash on desk the next day. Our whole Christmas was restored.

There were other small miracles. The barely teenaged girl sitting in front of the Walmart store front doors on Christmas Eve. Watching her trying to play a flute to gather money so her family had Christmas. In tune she was not. But the melody was remembered. Every few patrons leaned in and dropped something in the case. Even the manager at Walmart and the store employees let her be. That was a miracle in itself. They were usually so strict on their policy of not permitting anyone to approach their customers.

Gifts given. Phone calls made. Memories shared. Tears shed. All at the needed time and place. All given without pretense or schedule. All done because whomever reached out due to the Christmas season. I saw those miracles, sometimes provided those miracles, and sometimes received them.





## Chapter 5

I was greeted with pure joy as I entered the gym for my exercise routine and swim. The attendant had never seen me with my Santa hat on. She squealed and laughed. She took a picture to send to her family. I just laughed with her. I told her my Santa stories. The ones about my interactions with the little ones over the years. She couldn't hear enough. But I came to workout. I had to leave her after more than 20 minutes had passed even though we were reluctant to part.

Kept the hat on as the day progressed. Members at the club giggled, laughed, and smiled. Some shared Christmas memories. Others shared Christmas recipes. Many shared family traditions. Many were friends I had know for years. Some were those that I had recently met. All knew me before. But when I put on the hat, I was Santa. They even called me Santa.

Stopped to fill up the old sleigh and had more than a few car windows open. Kids, parents, and others shouting and waving at Santa. I was waiting at a stop light with the window down. Kid in the next car was freaking out, pulling on the driver's sleeve and pointing towards me. Diver looked my way and gave a huge smile. I waved back and winked at the child. Kid about lost it completely.



I had to stop in for the yearly Santa haircut to prepare for the Christmas season. The sour looks turned into smiles. The lady doing my hair seemed honored. She took a bit of time to do it right. I told her of the time a little blonde girl was with her younger raven-haired sister. I told her how the blonde had informed me right in



front of her sister and parents that I could give her sister's presents to her. She did so without a bit of remorse. The lady doing my hair smiled, chuckled, and grinned. As I left, she seemed so much happier than when I came in.

As the season progressed, I made sure I wore my hat. Little moments of interactions allowed me to share Christmas. It was making my Christmas. Still the real test of this Christmas would be Christmas itself. I knew that. What was gonna happen on Christmas day when it was just me and her. Could I fill myself up with enough Christmas spirit to get through day? Would the hat hold enough Christmas cheer for both me and her? I was going to try. I just didn't know if that old Santa hat still had the magic I needed.

It was Christmas Eve. I had been overwhelmed more than once with things to do for myself, for my wife, and for others. More than once I had become so stressed, I took a day off to recover. I don't think any Christmas had been as stressful as this one. I was reminded more than once that even though Christmas season was upon us the day-to-day problems with living had to be handled. What was important to a business, bank, or friend wasn't a crisis to me. Still each had to be managed before they turned into a crisis. Thank goodness for hospice home care. More than once the simple things took a pressure off my shoulders.



But time marches on and Christmas Eve came on time as it always does, whether you are ready or not. We had taken a couple of those Christmas light trips through town. It was a good time watching her look. Her eyes sparkled like a small child which in a way she now was. It gave me warm memories I could carry with me to future Christmases.



It was getting time to order the Pizza Hut pizza. My wife and I had gotten married when we both worked at a Pizza Hut. She was head waitress. I was manager. We closed the Hut down for our reception. Local restaurants I had develop relations with provided food. The local brewery provided a keg. From then on Pizza Hut always held a special place in our hearts and relationships.

But it was when we were Christmas shopping that it became a tradition. We were always on the brink at Christmas. More than once the presents had to be paid for with the last paycheck before Christmas. Many a time was spent rocketing from one store to the next on Christmas Eve trying to buy all the presents before the stores closed. Leaving my wife's gifts until Christmas Eve was becoming a not too comfortable tradition itself. The stores closed at 6 pm. We usually fell into the house exhausted by 6:30 pm. The boys would be all wide eyed and geared up from way too much candy and cookies. Dinner had to be served.



Too exhausted to cook we ordered from the only restaurant that was usually open, Pizza Hut. We did this so often that it became tradition. When the boys reached teen years and young adulthood, they looked forward to the Pizza Hut pizzas. Since then, every Christmas Eve wasn't a big meal with turkey, dressing, and mashed potatoes. It was Pizza Hut pizza ordered for delivery at 6:30 pm. Through the ages they were always there and always delivered.

I had my hat on as I made the order. Our Christmas lights, such as they were, twinkled as we waited for the delivery. My wife sat and watched an old Christmas movie on Netflix, *White Christmas*, I think. That movie was old when I was young. I never really cared for it. But she loved the ending with the big red dresses. She stared



at the TV as the movie played. I don't know if she really saw it more than remembered it.

She had no interest in what was being ordered. I must say our order was a bit smaller than when the boys were here. We even went with personal pizzas now, not the two large with everything we used to order. The delivery driver knocked on the door and I opened with my hat. She giggled and smiled. A tip and a "Merry Christmas" later found me with the goodies and a small side order of cookies I hadn't ordered. A gift from the delivery driver. The hat was still working. Nice.

A few presents were under the tree. I knew what all of them were. I even had to buy mine this year. I chuckled a bit at that thought. It seemed ironic that after 50 some Christmases, in a way, we had come back to doing Christmas like her family had done it originally.



I had that old Santa hat on. I knew like most Santa's knew that the magic of Christmas was intensified on Christmas Eve. The magic grew and grew in strength, filling up those old hats right up until the Christmas hour. The magical hour between 12 am and 1 am on Christmas morning. After midnight those old hats just didn't seem to be able to take anymore. They started giving more magic than they took until some time on Christmas Day they just became another toboggan waiting for the next season.

No one really needed Santa after 1 am on Christmas Day. The season for Santa was over. Just the joy he spread was all that was left. Santa himself had finished his job. Left to find a warm hearth, warm cookies, and a cold glass of milk. His duty was done. Most young and old that cheered his name right up until the gifts were delivered, would think little of him until another season was





upon them. Santa was part of the season. He was not really part of the day. He, like discarded wrapping paper, was no longer much of a thought. By Christmas Day night Santa and his old hat was more funny than wonderful. It was even a bit awkward to observe Santa or watch Santa shows after Christmas came.

That was alright. It was as it should be. Christmas was for family and friends. It was that time to share and remember what was good and great. To remember what was past and to hope for the future. Santa, and that old hat, had ushered those feelings in.



Santa was the delivery service. He was not the gift.

Still if you never had felt the magic fill the old Santa hat you never would know the loss as the magic fled from the old hat on Christmas Day. I devoured the feeling of the magic filling the Santa hat on Christmas Eve. It was so intoxicating. I also mourned the loss of the feeling as it fled the hat on Christmas Day. It was a sad and yet happy experience. The warmth of the magic filled the wearer with fleeting joy. But like a really good chocolate chip cookie you knew you would eat it all and eventually nothing would be left.

I took her to bed on Christmas Eve after the movie ended. She looked at the bright lights on the Christmas tree. I gave myself a moment to believe she was still fully there with me looking at the beauty that was wrought. I hugged her and turned off the lights. I put the darned old dog in the bed with her. Both cats curled around her feet and head. She fell asleep as I prepared to climb in for a warm winter's nap.

Christmas morning came. There was no running down the stairs in excited whispers. There was no child jumping on our chest at 5 am tell us that Santa had come. There was a gentle lightness in



the room as the sun rose in the east. She wouldn't be up for hours. The boys wouldn't be calling until the afternoon. I put the old Santa hat on my head. I could feel its warmth had diminished through the night. A little breakfast, some news, and a turn at answering nature's call put me in a moment of quiet before she woke up. There wasn't anything to do but think of the past, the future, and today. I smiled and wished the boys were here. I would really like them to see their mom. I could use them close by myself. But wishes had to give way to reality.

She finally got up and I gave her breakfast. After a few moments I passed out the presents. She stripped off the wrapping paper more in habit than excitement. She smiled at the gifts. She tried a couple out. Then I got her the Christmas stocking. She smiled at the stocking and dove into the scratch off tickets. A little breakfast then a quick change of clothes found her sitting in front of the TV again.



I sat with her, the old Santa hat sitting on the end table. I had my hand laying on it as a small meat slow roasted in the crock pot. The room was warm. Cats and dog gathered around. I slowly fell asleep in that comfortable recliner waiting for the video phone call. I felt the last dregs of the magic in that hat slip away as I began to snore.

I was roused from my slumber by the yapping of the dog. She was trying to get up to answer the front door. I tried to move and get ahead of her when I heard the door open, and a ruckus of noise and voices make an entrance. My hand moved from that old Santa hat as I moved forward in my recliner. A face came around the corner of the door, then another.



“Hey, dad!” Came a holler from a very familiar set of faces. The boys had come home for Christmas. Each of them wore an old Santa hat. But leading them both, in a Santa hat of her own, was the granddaughter munching a chocolate chip cookie. A tear fell from my eye as I hugged them all. They surrounded their mom, and she was really, finally, excited to see her family. I looked at the family. Then saw the old Santa hat on the end table. It’s fading magic filled me. Christmas and Christmas magic had come once again. I did not know what the future was going to hold or how much time I had with her. But I had today, this Christmas. For now, it was enough.





**Merry Christmas to All, and to all a Good Night**



A Happy, Happy  
New 2023

(at least there are no national elections this year!)



***This Story is my Gift to you.***

May you know the love and joy of the Holiday Season year round. May you  
enjoy it in person with friends and family in 2023

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