

What Remains



By
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Merry Christmas 2021



(You Made It!)



Chapter 1

Thomas sat and contemplated. Christmas was such a marker in time for him. More than New Year's Day it seemed a time to reflect on what had been. What was to come. This year's time of reflection produced a cornucopia of thoughts.

"What a year!" He thought. "Of course, each year seemed to have its own set of excitements, one year building upon another. Still this year seemed to work hard to outdo the year before. And that year was a whopper. The whole country if not the world shut down to a 100-year pandemic. Hard to top that experience. But this year was trying hard.

First. The only time this country didn't have a peaceful transition from one president to another in its entire history. There was the insurrection at the Capitol. Unheard of or believed in this country. We even had peaceful transitions during world wars, civil wars, and assassinations. But not this year. Then there were the pandemic vaccine protests against saving lives or protecting your own. Arguments about providing help to those in need, or not. Court trials that seemed to define racism for many. Abortion again, redistricting, suspect vote audits, and resurgence and re-emergence of tabloid journalism. One needed to take a breath."

Thomas did take a deep breath as he rocked his first new grandchild, Kayla Lee, in his lap. She of course was the most beautiful, intelligent, and wonderful baby that had ever been born. He wondered what the future had in store for her. He remembered clearly when he had set forth to conquer the world those many years ago. He was bright eyed





with clear vision. Determined to bend the world to his will. He would make things better for everyone. Thomas wondered if she would be allowed to do the same.

Thomas looked over to his wife of more than 45 years. She labored over the sink washing some errant dishes as he took his moment to hold this tiny wiggling and gurgling bright ray of life. A disease had taken hold of Sarah a few years back. It wasn't too bad now. She was still more than with him. They were hopeful for a new breakthrough against this setback. Maybe someday soon she would return fully to him. In some ways though there was a balance to Kayla Lee beginning her life while they worked on the winter of theirs. He was glad they had a chance to see the beginning of this generation.



Another chime pinged on his phone. A cursory glance at the phone's face showed it was nothing but another advertisement. Thomas chuckled. An add on his phone. He would have never thought it. Not back when he was getting ready to take on the world. His mind went to his Christmases past. Long needle pine trees in each house, plastic Santa's on the porch, and lights strung meticulously across the eaves of each home. He remembered when he went riding with his

new wife during a light snowstorm. The car's heater was pushing out waves of warmth when they turned into one of the richer sections of town.

It was a small cul-de-sac of maybe 10 houses. But each was draped in white lights. No colored lights like the rest of the town. Just white lights, the big bulbs. Not those tiny ones all the rage now. The snow fell lightly. There were no cars driving by. No tire tracks



in the snow. The effect was magical. Thomas and Sarah stopped the car and sat quietly in the middle of the road for more than a few moments. He had thought they had fallen into an enchanted wonderland. The thought made him wonder. What was he leaving Kayla Lee for Christmas? Would he even leave her a Christmas?

Sarah came and took Kayla Lee from his lap. There was a warm rocker and a bottle of formula waiting. Sarah smiled as Kayla Lee settled into her arms and began suckling.

What to leave Kayla Lee? How could he pass on his happiness in the season? All he had was now. He so wanted her to believe in Christmas and people. He wanted her time to be joyous. Could he even influence her future when he wasn't there? Thomas got up from his chair, thoughts of future he wouldn't be in tormenting his brain.



Chapter 2

Christmas had changed so much over the years. There were the purists still demanding that Christmas was the celebration of Christ's birth. But Thomas was of the other persuasion. Christmas had morphed into so much more than a celebration of the birth of Christ. It had become a month's long celebration dedicated to peace, happiness, and joy between all men and women all religions and cultures. A result he was sure any Christ would prefer over the exultation of him or his birth. The fact he looked a lot like many peoples understanding of Santa Claus didn't hurt his support for this opinion.

But the change was exactly why he wondered, even worried about what would remain. What would he leave Kayla Lee and the rest of the world. Would there continue to be a moment in time when peace mattered more than war? When sharing was worth more than greed? He decided to go have some hot cocoa with friends and contemplate the question some more.



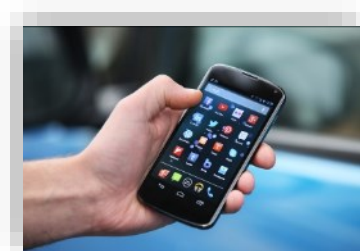
Being older meant being retired. Being retired more often than not meant being in the South at Christmas. Thomas was one of those that subscribed to such

standards. Hence, the trip to the local donut shop for hot cocoa was not one with snow covered streets or icicles on the eaves. The palm trees had lights wrapped around their trunks. Weird large balloons



shaped like snow men or Santa's were tethered to the green lawns. The cooler temperatures required long legged sweatpants instead of shorts. It was definitely not the post card Christmas scene of so many television shows and movies.

Still warm weather didn't mean a lack of distressed motorists. Just different issues. The cell phone flying over the hood of the car into the ditch was Thomas' first indication this incident was more than a flat tire.



He pulled his vehicle in front of the small woman with a child on her hip standing in front of a disabled auto. He checked both ways and got out of his chariot of the day.

Now in honor of the season, Thomas was wearing his Santa cap. But lack of concern and clothing options also had him dressed in a red shirt with a green sweater coat. Stepping out of red pickup didn't hurt first impressions either. As he stood up and faced the small woman to begin his walk to her is when her sadness turned to a smile, then laughter.

"Santa. Well of course it's Santa." She said as he moved toward her. Thomas suddenly realizing his appearance just laughed.

"Need some help?" Thomas offered.

"Stupid phone battery went dead again. Car won't run. Can't get the kids home for lunch and there is Christmas shopping to do. Oh, and the baby is wet. Again! Yeah. I think I could use some help, Santa. If you don't mind." The young woman's eyes started to tear up. The stress of the season was beginning to take its toll.

Thomas handed her his phone and took the baby, wet diapers and all. It took her only moments to make her calls. Difference between growing up with a corded phone and a cell phone he



guessed. He wondered if she would even be able to dial a rotary phone. Then he giggled.

The small woman finished her call and turned toward him. Her shoulders drooped and her hair laid limply across a face laced with tired eyes and fresh tears. She handed him his phone.

“They will be here in two hours. Christmas rush apparently. How can there be a Christmas rush for towing?” She reached to take the baby.

“What are you going to do?” Thomas was now invested.

“Wait in the car with a baby and two toddlers for two hours. Thanks for your help.”

“Well, there is a donut shop, four grandpas and hot chocolate about a block up the street. I can take you. They even have a restroom for changing babies I am told.”



The woman hesitated. Just for a moment. Then she looked in her car at the two faces plastered against the window in wonder at Santa beside the car. She also looked at sitting on the side of a road waiting for a tow truck that may or may not come in two hours. Hot chocolate won out.

“Teresa, Santa. The name is Teresa.” She put out her small hand to shake Santa’s.

Thomas reached back. “Well, the name is....”

The woman put up her hand. The universal signal to men to stop talking.

“Your name is Santa. I don’t need your given name. To the kids and me you are Santa.” She grinned and went to fetch the kids while he once again took hold of the diaper changing needing baby. They headed to his pickup and climbed in. It was only a few moments to the donut shop. Her kids, Tommy and Diane, five and



four respectively he was told repeatedly, just filled the time asking questions.

As they got out Thomas led them to the table of his friends. As he said there were four grandfathers waiting. Each with a large grin as a bundle of kids made their way to the table. It took moments for Thomas to explain the situation and only moments more before hot chocolate was ordered along with a batch of hot donuts. The mother made her way to the bathroom, diaper bag in one hand and baby in the other. Two laps opened up and Tommy and Diane found themselves sipping hot chocolate and smearing chocolate toppings on their mouths.

Thomas found another chair and fixed himself up around the table with his back in the corner. It gave him a good vantage to see what all was happening in the room and observe his friends. He was exchanging laughs and looking over the menu for the best donut to have with his cocoa when a slight shadow fell across his menu. He looked up expecting to see Teresa. But it was another woman with a child hanging tight to her hand. The child was taking peeks at him from around her legs.



“The lady in the restroom with the baby says you are Santa. Could we, could she talk with you. You know. For Christmas.” The look on the face of lady seemed to beg kindness. It was soft, gentle, but with kind eyes. Yet a sadness set in the back of them. For some reason Thomas could see it.

“Sure, we can talk. Let’s move over to the other side of the room. That table over there.” Thomas moved across the room to the other corner. He sat himself facing the room. The lady came with him.



Her daughter came out from behind her leg. Thomas smiled at her warmly. She was such a darling. He asked if she wanted to sit on his lap. She nodded her head and reached her hands out to Thomas. Small hands wrapped in a pink sweater. Eyes as blue as the ocean.

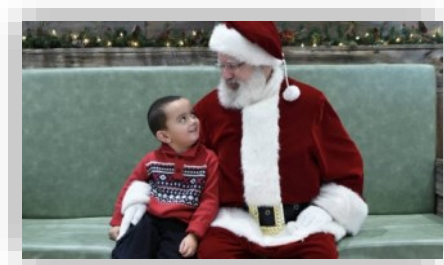
Her mom sat down on an empty chair. One of the grandfathers sat a cup of coffee in front of her. Thomas jiggled the child up and down. She took a sip of coffee and smiled. It was a beautiful smile a long time coming.

“So, what can Santa do for you two. You know, for Christmas.” Thomas smiled at the lady.

“You just did. It has been so long. So long.” The woman just smiled, and Thomas knew what she meant. Everyone had been so isolated. There was no contact. Santa’s were online if they were there at all. It was a lap to sit on. A drink to share. A moment of human contact. A moment with a stranger sharing kindness and peace.

Her daughter leaned in to whisper in Santa’s ear. She took a picture with her cellphone. He laughed a real ho, ho, ho. She giggled. Then he sang the first verse of Jingle Bells. She joined in. It was simple. It was pure.

The lady stood to go, and Thomas looked behind her. There stood a young father. A toddler of five at his leg.



“I swear I have my shots. So does the boy. We aren’t sick. No coughing. Nothing.” He looked a bit panicked. But it seemed so important to him. Thomas motioned for him to sit. A waitress moved over and

put a cup full of hot chocolate in front of both men. The boy stood



next to his dad eyes as big as saucers. Drool escaping from one side of his mouth.

A friend tapped him on the shoulder. One of the grandpas were taking Teresas shopping at the strip mall next door. They would be back in about an hour and not to worry.

Thomas reached for the boy. He shuffled over and finally made his way to Thomas' lap. As he was settling in the man began to speak.

"There isn't a Santa in the whole town. I haven't seen a real Santa in two years. When I saw you well, you know? The boy has gotta see Santa." The man smiled as if he had won the lottery. His boy was gonna see Santa. A real Santa. He took out his phone and began taking pictures.

Thomas held the boy and listened intently as he whispered his most important wishes into his ear. Weird. With all the games available the boy wanted a bicycle, a red one, the most. Thomas whispered it back



to him in a stage whisper his father could hear and grinned. His Dad almost whooped learning that deep dark secret. He stood up to go and extended his hand. Thomas took it and shook it. When he looked inside his hand there was a twenty.

He turned to give it back, but the man was gone and two more urchins with a mommy in tow stood before him. Hot chocolate go cups were being nursed along with a box of donuts. Behind them were another set of urchins waiting their turn in line. His friends were setting up a waiting area checking for shots and protective gear. They were grinning and laughing at him as they were having the most fun they had had in months. As he turned to welcome



the next child the manager turned up with a Christmas blanket to drape over the chair he was in. He even moved the Christmas tree, so it sat closer to where he sat. The stage being set. Thomas settled in for a few more Christmas wishes.

Thomas begged off after a couple of hours. He was getting tired and had to use the facilities. It took a bit of doing, but the manager and his friends finally got the people to stop lining up. He finished with the last one and had a pretty good pot of cash to show for his efforts. He put it in a go bag and asked one of his friends to drop it by the women's shelter on his way home. Knowing his friend, it was as good as done, plus a little more.

The manager gave him two dozen donuts and four hot chocolates on his way out. Teresa was pulling in the lot as he left. Her car apparently fully repaired. She rolled down the window. The baby was asleep in the back between two equally tired toddlers.

"Thanks Santa. You made my Christmas in so much more than one way. Merry Christmas." She handed him a small Christmas present all wrapped with red paper and a green bow. It included a 'Do Not Open Till Christmas' tag emblazoned upon it. Teresa took one last picture with a new phone and rolled up her window. She drove off. Thomas could swear he heard Christmas Carols in the car.

Thomas got home in time to give Kayla Lee her bottle before bedtime. He threw on a mask this time while he rocked. He would take a home test tomorrow to be sure, but his friends had worked hard to make sure the virus wouldn't get him. After he rocked her to sleep, Sarah and his son got a full review of the events of the day.



Chapter 3

A quick home care test showed no positive results. A second opinion with the online doc confirmed he should be good to go since he had had all his shots. So, the next day found Thomas rocking his granddaughter once more. Pleasant memories of the day before giving him a constant chuckle.

Still, concern kept creeping in as he looked at his grandchild. Would there be a Christmas for this small sibling? Heck Christmas celebrations of family and friends only really began about 200 years ago. Before that there were a smattering of different types of observances. Even ones that led to riots. He and his friends had grown up with Santa, Frosty, as well as Christ. The presents under the tree, family gatherings, turkeys and ham as much as a part of Christmas for them were in reality rather new in the whole scope of things. Thomas would like to be able to keep that for his granddaughter though, especially the warm feeling. But how?



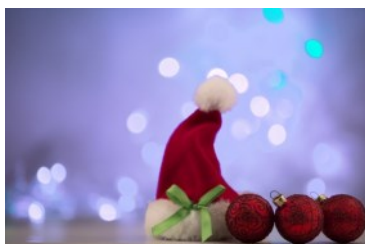
Thomas looked up from his reverie as Kayla Lee was taken out of his arms for a much-needed diaper change. He glanced over to the television and saw the tabloid news blaring on about such and such. On air pundits expressing solemn opinions designed to curry favor with the intended audience. He had long given up on tabloid news. Mostly he just stuck to the weekend news for his information. Tabloid pundits were nothing if not lazy. They didn't work weekends, so the news came in unfiltered.

He wondered how the tabloid news was playing on his television when he realized the time. He had to go. A Christmas lunch with a longtime friend was upon him. He couldn't pin down the



time these lunches began to happen. Seemed they were always there. One or two close friends he had developed over the years would gather on the odd day to tell stories, talk politics or religion, and generally share life. It could get to be a lively conversation, depending on the friend he was sharing a meal. Friends weren't chosen for political leanings. He was frequently at odds over many positions with some. But their ties were so much stronger than opinion. Whatever their leanings they believed in each other and the community.

Thomas grabbed his Santa cap, the green sweater and headed for the door. At least he wasn't wearing the red shirt underneath this time. Some decent Christmas traffic and the opportune parking spot allowed him to slide into the chair opposite Walt right on time. A huge grin, some chiding about his Santa cap and soon they were onto ordering.



It was a half hour into the second topic of the day when one of his friends from the other side of the political spectrum ambled up to express season's greetings. She had a buddy in tow that he had never met. As she reached down to get a hug her buddy expressed some extremist political sentiment searching for likeminded approval. Walt smiled. She grinned, stepped back, and waited. It wasn't too long.

"Do you know the difference between an anecdote and a fact? Do you even know what anecdote means?" Thomas confronted the man quickly. They were off to the races.

Her buddy stumbled trying to find a response. Not expecting a confrontation only compliance.



“Well for clarification. An anecdote is a story about a real person or incident that is usually hearsay and unreliable. Just because a story is repeated frequently does not make it fact. It is still hearsay. A fact is something that has been proven to be true. Usually by an independent third party. What you have provided is an anecdote. A very partisan anecdote.” Thomas looked up from his meal and waited for a response.

Suddenly finding himself the focus of the surrounding lunch crowd her buddy shifted uncomfortably and stumbled his answer. Thomas pointed to the chairs beside him and motioned for his friend and her buddy to set down.

“Look I don’t mind that you have a different opinion. What is important is that you believe in something. Something true. You have to believe in something, or you will fall for anything.”

“Don’t you mean ‘stand’? Stand for something or fall for anything.”

“No. I don’t. A person can’t go around making up or reading stories to set a foundation for an opinion or belief. Just because you ‘saw’ something or ‘heard’ something from a friend or, God forbid, tabloid television that doesn’t make it true. Avoiding information or facts that you don’t like doesn’t make your documentation of information true. That foundation is made of quicksand. It will fall in any wind or simple resistance.”

His table of friends were leaning in to listen. Thomas was known to go on a tangent now and then. Usually, one worth listening. Thomas carried on.

“Take Christmas. I believe in Christmas. There is evidence given to believe in Christmas and Christ. Stories told from the Bible. So, they must be true. But you would have to have a complete faith in the Truth of the





Bible for these stories to be known as fact. What if you weren't a Christian? What if you looked at the Bible as parables or anecdotes? Would the Bible and Christmas be true then? To you? To your friends?

I also believe in Santa. A child's fantasy. Written in fairy tales and molded into some fantastical creature by modern cinema. An anecdote at best. Still, I believe in him and Christmas. Because I have proof that has been provided by independent third parties."

The restaurant staff and customers around Thomas had grown quiet. Trying to listen in without interrupting. Thomas kept up the narrative.



"Anyone that has done any cursory research knows, and honest pastors will acknowledge, that Jesus Christ was not born on Christmas. I am not here to argue it. Because it does not matter. Christmas is much more than

a birthday. It is a time of peace, remembrance, even joy. In World War I opposing sides stopped fighting on Christmas and shared what little they had with each other. That is a fact. Work shifts are exchanged so family can be together on Christmas. That is a fact. Arguments are put aside nationally and internationally on Christmas so peace can be shared. That is a fact.

You can look up Christmas in any reference and find unimpeachable evidence that Christmas, the Christmas spirit, is real. By our own definition then Christmas is more than anecdote it is a fact. One need not be a Christian or believe in the Truth of the Bible to believe in Christmas. Christmas on its own is fact.

The same can be said about Santa. On Christmas Eve all over the world children and adults receive gifts. Unexpected gifts. In one night. You will tell me it wasn't one man and some reindeer,



and I will agree. But yet in the tradition of hope, joy, and peace people of all ages put gifts under the tree and mark them 'From Santa'. Not one of those providing the gifts expecting recognition in return. This is a fact."

Thomas took a drink of water and set it down. He looked around at his audience.

"Now none of this requires me to 'stand' for something. I only have to believe in it. Which I do. But that belief is based on facts. Facts that are proven whether I like them or not. I don't make up my own set of facts to suit my arguments. Nor do I use anecdotes. I found evidence repeated over many years and decades to confirm what has happened and why. Because of those facts I believe in Christmas and Santa and will continue to do so."



A smattering of applause greeted the ending to his story. Thomas even got a hug from his waitress. The restaurant returned to the day.

His friend buddy, the one that made the comment nodded and smiled. "You said he was something else. I agree. It's a bit to think about and I will. Merry Christmas, Santa."

They got up from the table and shook hands. Thomas even got one more hug before he sat down. Thomas and Walt finished up their conversation best they could. There were more than a few interruptions of "Merry Christmas" and the occasional little toddler wanting to sit on his lap. He obliged them all. When he looked for his check, he found it paid. "Merry Christmas" was all that was on the tab. He would never know who paid it. As far as Thomas was concerned Christmas paid it.



Chapter 4

It was getting close to Christmas. It was only a day before Christmas Eve. Thomas was having a great time. His granddaughter was keeping most of his attention. But she would be leaving to go home on the 26th. He still hadn't reconciled his concern for keeping Christmas in his granddaughter's life. Rational thought told him it wasn't his job or his to worry. But being a grandfather put all those rational thoughts in the trash bin. There had to be a way.

He kept asking himself how his granddaughter could enjoy the benefits of Christmas and Santa. Those benefits that he had so recently realized, enjoyed, and shared at the donut shop and lunch if he couldn't ensure that Christmas endured.

Thomas snuggled deeper into his recliner. The television blared as background when he fell asleep. His dreams turned to younger days. Images of his time with his boys at Christmas. Time spent on late night gift wrapping with his wife. Gifts delivered in the freezing cold late at night so children's eyes would pop on Christmas morning.

In his dreams he remembered some of the first times he played Santa. It was a Girl Scout Troop's annual Christmas party. They had lost their Santa or didn't have one. He had a gut then. Not as big as he had now, but it wasn't too shabby. The Girl Scout Leader a friend and co-worker asked him to play Santa. She even provided a Santa suit.



He grinned. The idea of playing Santa had grown in his head with the success of a new movie on the theater screens. He tried on the suit. Didn't fit. He headed over to the costume and party store. They had one custom suit hanging on the wall. The clerk took it



down and he tried it on. It fit. More than that, he looked like Santa. Even the clerk wanted to know if he did private parties.

A couple of chuckles and a more than normal pay out the suit was his. His sons were thrilled when he put it on. They laughed and giggled. One of them asked to go with him to the Girl Scout party. Thomas had agreed. To his surprise when the day came his son was dressed as the head elf from the movie, complete with a multi-colored frumpy hat. His son was now officially 'Bernard'. To say they were a success would be an understatement. It was a warm memory he dreamt of occasionally. It always brought a smile to his face. Even while he slept.

Thomas' dreams began to turn. His science fiction proclivities developing a more dystopian vision. It was a future. He looked up and watched air cars race across the skies. Glistening buildings seeming to be floating in the air could be seen in the distance. He himself was standing in an all but abandoned city street. Dilapidated cars, tire missing, windshields shattered, vehicles lying in rust were all about. A thick layer of fine dirt covered the street. Storefronts, if they could be called that, stared at him with vacant eyes. The occasional vermin, often followed by a pursuing cat, scattered trash and rattled empty cans as they raced through the debris.

Thomas looked up and saw a large date calendar hanging in the window of one of the abandoned stores. The calendar proclaimed the day December 25th in big bold letters. Somehow, he knew it was Christmas Day. But there were no decorations, no lights, no trees, and no Santas. The dream shattered his calm. He was becoming sad.



Suddenly Thomas flew to one of the glistening towers in the distance. It was bright, shiny, and had the glorious rays of the sun beating upon it. He could see the city below, the racing air cars, the



people on promenades bustling to and fro. He warmed to the site. Thomas looked around and saw the entrance to the building. A clean, sparkling window was just to the left. On the window hung the large date calendar he had seen in the streets below. The same date was proclaimed, December 25th. Thomas looked about. There were no ornaments, no displays, no depictions of the nativity, no carols playing. There was no evidence anywhere of Santa.

Thomas wandered into the room past the door. It was a small set of shops. Displays of merchandise filled small tables. A restaurant stood to one side with a section of tables in front of its entrance. People sat at the tables. Waiters whisked back and forth with scrumptious meals. But there were no presents stuffed into large bags. No harried shoppers checking lists. There was no evidence anywhere of any Christmas or Santa. Thomas' dream was disturbing, and he shifted uncontrollably in his comfy recliner.

Then Thomas saw him. It was a small child, a toddler really. The child's eyes were haunting. He didn't say anything. He just stood and stared at Thomas. Thomas saw the simple, dirty, threadbare skull cap atop his head. It covered his ears and settled just above his eyebrows. The cap used to be red with a jagged white line in its circumference followed by a large green line embedded with some white symbols as decorations. The rest of him was dressed no better. A long sleeve jacket that covered his chest had once been brown and was now a more whitish grey. A pair of dirt covered jeans with a patch and multiple tears covered his short legs. He wore mismatched sneakers that looked too large.



He stood at the entrance to an alley. A streetlight shown on the small patch of pavement that surrounded the child. The boy looked absolutely abandoned. But there were no tears. His face was



drawn, dirty and smudged. His lips little more than purplish thin lines. Thomas starred at the boy unable to do anything. He didn't know what to do. Then the child raised his arms in a small gesture of help, a question of hope.

Thomas wanted to pick up the child so badly. He wanted to hold him in his arms. He wanted to help him. Thomas wanted to give him Santa. He reached out his arms. Nothing happened. He looked down at his arms. They were bare, old, wrinkled, and small. There was no Santa suit covering them. No soft gloves on his hands. No white fur trimming bright red sleeves. They were the arms of an ancient. He tried to reach again. But something was tugging on him, holding him back. He fought briefly before he heard his son trying to wake him up.

“Dad. Dad. You all right. You’re having a nightmare.” His son was gently pulling on his sweater.

As Thomas opened his eyes, his son grinned. “Must have been some dream.”

It took a moment for Thomas to awake and realize it had been a dream. But it was so real at the time. Thomas didn't think he could ever forget the look of that small child. He sat quietly while he regained his reality. His son sat with him as he awoke. Gradually Thomas told him of the dream and the haunting small child.

It took more than a few moments to have life kick back in. Eventually he found himself with Kayla Lee. Her small grin and gentle cooing taking all of his attention and scaring away Christmas demons.



Chapter 5

It was Christmas Eve. Thomas was all at once excited and a little sad. It was the final day of the Christmas season. Tomorrow was Christmas and everyone knew Santa rested on Christmas. No one needed to be reminded to shop, be with family, or hug your neighbor on this day. On this day Christmas took over. Santa wouldn't be needed until next season. Still, it was Christmas Eve. The biggest day of the season for Santas.

As he had many years previously Thomas put on his old reliable Santa coat, a green shirt, red pants, and some black boots. Sure, he had all his presents wrapped and ready. Everyone on his list had been shopped and sorted. But you couldn't miss the fun to be had when Santa walked around the big box on Christmas Eve passing out candy canes.

Thomas usually headed out around noon. It was a short day because most stores, save the convenience stores selling gas, closed by 6 pm. Thomas had wandered 2 big box stores by 3 pm and was safely holding a small court at the local fast-food joint around 4 pm. Thomas did miss his youngest son on these trips. His son often act-



ed aloof when they went out. But he instigated many of the contacts, often wore an elf hat, and laughed along with him when those small eyes bulged at seeing Santa in the flesh.

Five o'clock came and so did a phone call. Sarah needed some things at the store before it closed. His son wanted to make one more quick trip to finalize the Christmas stockings. She asked him to come by and pick up his son for a final trip to the big box. Thomas was more than happy to do so. It was get-



ting quite dark as the sun set early in December. He could use his son's second set of eyes while driving.

His son had met him in the driveway. On his head was the old 'Bernard' cap. Thomas smiled broadly. He had no idea where his son had found that old piece of fabric. It was nice to know his son remembered the event just as fondly as he did. His son piled into the car, moved the radio to blare some traditional Christmas music, and rolled down his window. Thomas and his son sang loudly and off key all the way to the store. It was just great.

They were exiting the big box just as it closed. The manager laughingly shoving them out the door and locking it behind them. In moments, just before they arrived at their car the interior lights were turned off. The parking lot lights were going dark as well, except for a few left on for security purposes. They were alone in the parking lot. Everyone else long since headed home.

Thomas stopped as he was placing the items into the trunk. He looked around and heard the quiet. Christmas was arriving. Six more hours of family time, hurriedly wrapped presents, baking pies, and readying turkeys would all wind down to heated anticipation of the morning. But right now, Thomas could feel Christmas arriving, quiet, soft, and caring. His son could feel it also.

Thomas closed the trunk and turned. Something inside the circle of light of one of the remaining security lamps caught his eye.



In a moment he knew what it was. He began walking toward the child. The child with the red skull cap, sunken eyes and torn clothing. His son saw the child as well and joined his father.

They walked quietly, quickly, but did not rush. They didn't want to scare the toddler. The child never moved. He waited as if he had been expecting them and only them. There were no tears, no



wailing, no sound. Just a haunting look of a very tired child. As soon as Thomas came close the child's arms rose from his side as if begging to be picked up.

Thomas looked at his arms. The Santa suit was on him. The sleeves were red with white trim. There were gloves on his hands. This was real. Thomas reached out and picked up the child. It weighed almost nothing. The child said nothing as well.

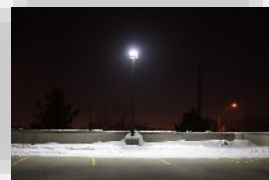
"What now, dad?" His son was concerned, worried. The child needed care.

"Let's get him to the hospital." Thomas began to turn and head to the car.

"No!" The child spoke for the first time. It was a simple clear command. It stopped Thomas and his son in place. The child was pointing to the side of the big box.

"You want us to go there?" His son asked.

The child just pointed and said nothing else. Thomas held the child close to his chest as he and his son walked around the side of big box. The child struggled to be let down. Thomas did. The child took Thomas' hand and pulled him forward. Quietly, slowly they walked. Half-way down, lying atop a discarded cardboard box, lighted only by the glow of the moon, lay a small woman.



Her face was beaten and bruised. She lay unconscious in a pool of blood. In her arms lay a newborn babe. Thomas was stunned. His son reacted. A phone came out of his back pocket. Emergency services were called. His son took off his coat and wrapped the baby in its warmth. The baby opened its eyes and attempted to cry.

Thomas took off his Santa coat and placed it on the unconscious woman. He grabbed the toddler and held him in his arms. He



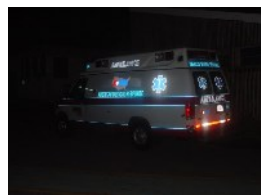
watched as his son comforted the baby and mother. Thomas was worried, scared, and proud. His son never wavered. The flash of blue and red emergency lights started to fill the small world around them. Sirens could be heard. Thomas' son kept the phone on and directed the ambulance to their location.

First responders jumped from their trucks. IV's were placed in small tender arms.

The baby was wrapped in secure sanitary bandages. A gurney was pulled from the ambulance and the woman placed atop. Doors slammed shut, sirens blared and suddenly

Thomas and his son were standing answering questions as police secured the area. It was then and only then that Thomas realized he was still holding the child. He had fallen asleep in his arms.

Thomas gave a silent signal to his son and headed back to their car. He placed the boy on the front seat next to him and started the engine. In a few moments the car was warm. His son returned from talking with police. His son got in the car, and they headed for the hospital. It was time for the child to sleep in peaceful security with his mother.



Epilogue

By noon the next day the hospital had called to inform Thomas that the woman, baby, and child were all doing fine. They would have to stay awhile. But any health crisis was for now, over.

It was a relief to Thomas as well as his son. Sarah beamed at the news. Kayla Lee cooed in her grandfathers' arms. In too soon of a time, Kayla Lee needed a nap and so did grandpa. He snuggled deep into his recliner.



His dreams soon drifted to the boy. What was his future? Did Christmas save them? Did Santa? Maybe. But Thomas dreamt of his son. What he had done. How quickly he reacted. There had been no discussion. No pretext. No

concern for his own safety. His son believed in Santa and Christmas same as Thomas did. But watching him in action meant so much more. Thomas slept through the afternoon contemplating a thought that argued at the back of his mind.

Thomas awoke to the sound of a child squealing in laughter. He looked through half shut eyes and observed his son playing with his daughter. The soft gentleness as his son looked at her. The warm safety she felt as she looked at him.

Then he realized what had been missing. What the argument was at the back of his mind. That look in the boy's eyes. They had been abandoned. The boy, his mother and his sister had literally been left for dead. There was no safety, security, or love in that boy's eyes. Not until he saw Thomas' son hold the child's mom and take care of his newborn sister. Only then did those feelings return. Thomas had seen it. He had looked in the child's eyes as his son covered his mother and held her in his arms. A spark. A moment



shone softly in the child's eyes. It was enough to let the child sleep and rest. Someone had cared. Someone had loved.

There had been no Christmas in this child's life. There was no Santa. They were abandoned as abandoned could be. But his son had changed all that. Not by being a Santa. Not by invoking Christmas. By love. The love he was showing now to his little daughter.

Thomas sighed. He now knew he couldn't ensure Christmas would always be here. Santa could be a memory in a few generations. There was no way Thomas could know what the future would bring. Yes, he had great memories and new ones being created every year. He was thankful for that. But things change. He held a computer in his hands. He banked without going to a bank. He listened to Christmas carols without putting on a record. If he wanted, he could put a Christmas tree in the corner of his room, lights and all, without even getting a tree. Virtual reality and 3-D technology could accomplish that easily.



But he still believed in the power of Christmas and Santa. Even if, in the end, they were constructs of men that could wither in the sands of time. Their power was as strong as the beliefs of those that held them. Then what remains when the beliefs end and Christmas and Santa are no more? This was the unsolved argument in Thomas' mind. He was at war with his belief in Christmas and Santa and the knowledge that neither was destined to remain. What then? Was hope, love and peace gone? Was only the material and secular of consequence? It just couldn't be.

Thomas thought about the images of the future that dwelled in his dreams. The child had been there. He needed help as much then as he did now. But Christmas was gone and so was San-



ta. What would reach out to help the child? What would make the world, well, compassionate and caring? What remained?

Thomas looked up and saw his son reach out and pick up his granddaughter. In that moment his question was answered. His inner turmoil ended. He smiled and peace filled his soul. He knew what remained when Santa and Christmas were no longer there. Love remained. Love for a child. Love for a small woman and new baby given freely without need for reward. Love given by a complete stranger.

Thomas knew he wouldn't have to worry about leaving Christmas or Santa to his granddaughter. He had already left it in the hearts of both of his son's. He had left it in their love. Their love for each other. Love for others, for family, and friends. Most assuredly in the love for his granddaughter. Love both had learned to give freely. Thomas got off the couch and grabbed his Santa hat. He walked up to his son and placed it on his head.

"Merry Christmas, Santa." Thomas smiled as Kayla Lee giggled and cooed at her father and his new hat.





And on this day a child is born



Merry Christmas to all, and to all a Good Night



Merry Christmas and A Happy New 2022

(We all bloody well need it! Keep safe!)



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 2022

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