

Her Santa



By

www.thementalmom.com

Dr. Douglas Courtney

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Merry Christmas
2024



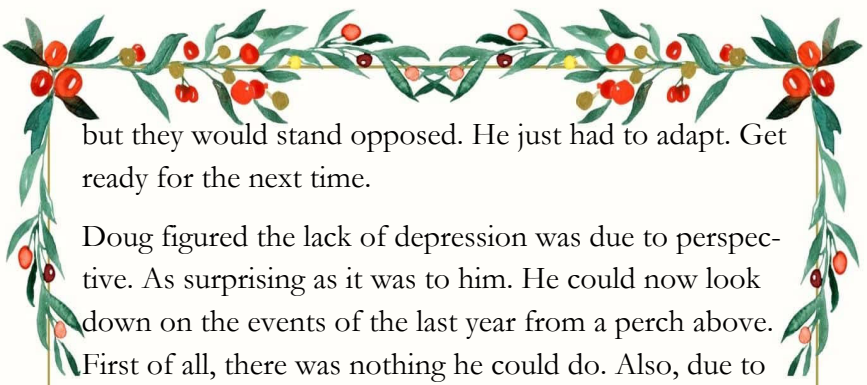


Chapter 1

Doug was well, even happy. It was very surprising to him. He was sure this holiday season was going to be miserable. His wife of 50 years passed in the spring and the hopeful candidate he supported failed again in the fall. He was sure the combination would send him into a depression spiral. It didn't.

Oh, he was sure when his fellow citizens voted for the liar, rapist, and convict to be President once again it would be devastating. He had so much hope for his country and believed in its people. But the election reminded him that reality didn't follow a screen play or story line. People could be fooled. They often were. You just had to adjust to the reality. After all, these types of events had happened before, even in his lifetime. The country survived. It was injured and the wounds had to heal. But they did.

Those that voted for the criminal thought they were voting for what was best for the country now. They, like Doug, believed they were voting for the country. They didn't think they were voting for its overthrow. Even now though, he knew they would stand opposed if the country was endangered. Maybe not as he desired,



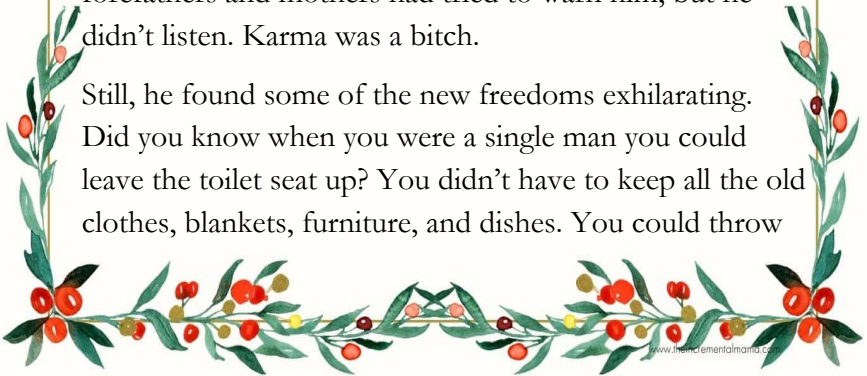
but they would stand opposed. He just had to adapt. Get ready for the next time.

Doug figured the lack of depression was due to perspective. As surprising as it was to him. He could now look down on the events of the last year from a perch above.

First of all, there was nothing he could do. Also, due to his advancing age, the odds of him having an impact or even feeling the new changes in the air were remote. He was learning to accept what he couldn't change and the mortality of his life. Doug, simply put, had decided to be happy for as long as he could.

This didn't mean there weren't fits of depression. He could barely watch some of the movies and television programs he had shared with his wife for so many years. Many times, he just changed the channel. He found himself talking to her picture, waving at it as he went by. Late at night alone in bed he would sob. But he would play a simple ambient sound and soon fell sound asleep. What worried him more was all the new aches and pains. He forefathers and mothers had tried to warn him, but he didn't listen. Karma was a bitch.

Still, he found some of the new freedoms exhilarating. Did you know when you were a single man you could leave the toilet seat up? You didn't have to keep all the old clothes, blankets, furniture, and dishes. You could throw



them out and get new ones. Who knew? If you wanted spaghetti three nights straight you could. You could even hire someone to clean your house without cleaning the house before they came. All wonderful revelations to Doug.

He hummed as Christmas approached and he baked another sheet of chocolate chip cookies. He put Christmas songs on the surround sound and laughed at videos of his granddaughter dancing around her Christmas tree. Happy memories filled his brain as the smell of the cookies wafted around his head. He glanced at his reflection in one of the shiny appliances. Yep. He still looked like Santa Claus. The belly was more than needed, but the smile, beard, and white hair filled out the persona. It was his wife that had gotten him into playing Santa years and years past. Could it be that long ago?

T I M A L L E N



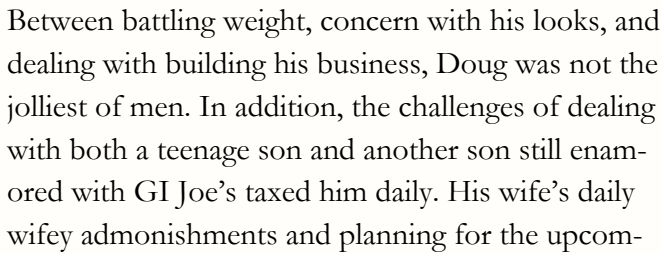
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Chapter 2

Doug remembered. He was a still proud youngish father. Not quite middle age, but rapidly approaching. He had been fighting the battle of the bulge for a number of years by then. It was a sore point that he wasn't a rugged lean adventurer type that turned women's heads. The term 'dad bod' hadn't made it to the daily lexicon back in the day but he was more than adapted to the description. Round and jolly, that was the best he could do. His wife insisted she didn't mind. She snuggled up on his chest in the cold winter days giving him loving hugs as they watched their 32-inch color television screen. That was bliss.

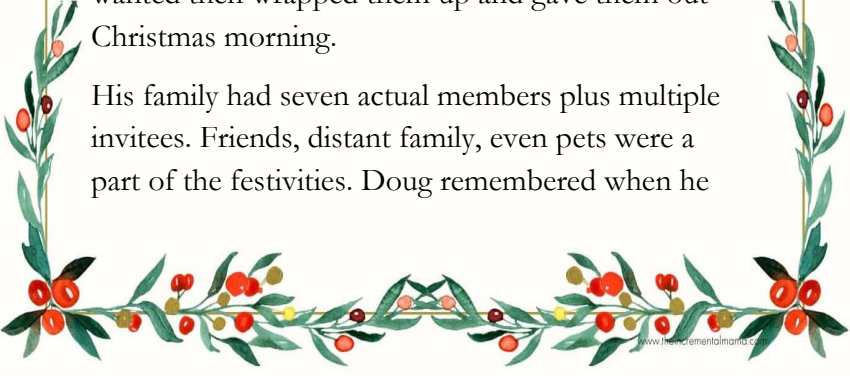
The movie "*The Santa Clause*" came out that fall. He and the family had seen it in the new four screen movie theater with "Dolby Surround Sound". He had laughed with the family and wondered how great it would be to be a Santa Claus. A real Santa Claus, someone who could spread joy to everyone. Best of all, he would have had his own toy factory. Now that would be a life. And he could eat all the chocolate chip cookies he wanted without worrying about dieting. Dreams of a younger man, maybe. He was sure it would never play out. His wife hated the cold.

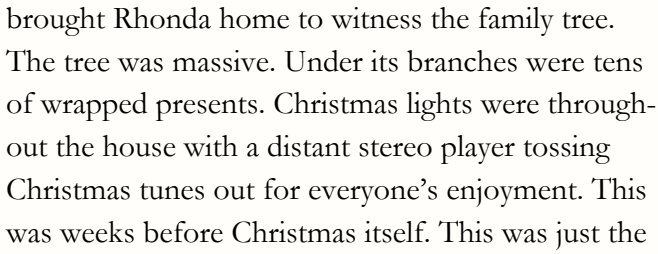


Between battling weight, concern with his looks, and dealing with building his business, Doug was not the jolliest of men. In addition, the challenges of dealing with both a teenage son and another son still enamored with GI Joe's taxed him daily. His wife's daily wifey admonishments and planning for the upcoming Christmas joined in this cacophony of stress.

Doug had to admit he was the architect of most of the Christmas anxiety. Rhonda, his wife, wasn't from as large a family as he was. Quite often her Christmases were confined to five participants. A mother, father, herself, and two female siblings. Doug was sure her dad had a place reserved for him in heaven as he was a single man in a household of women. It wasn't that their Christmases weren't happy, but they didn't seem to be the celebrations his family enjoyed. She even knew what presents she was getting as she picked them out before Christmas day. Her father and mother just bought what the kids wanted then wrapped them up and gave them out Christmas morning.

His family had seven actual members plus multiple invitees. Friends, distant family, even pets were a part of the festivities. Doug remembered when he

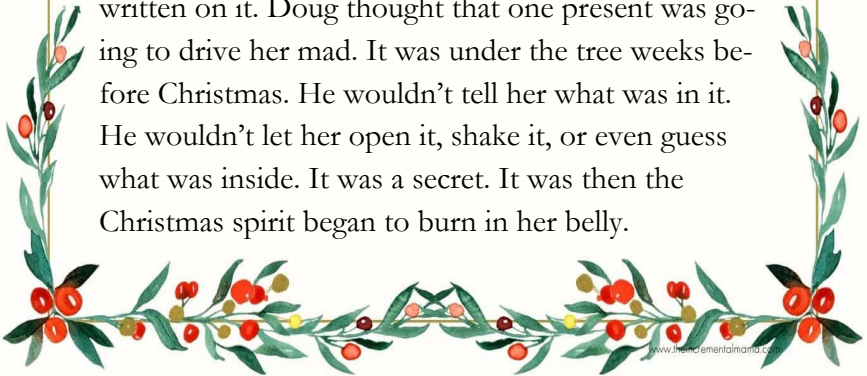


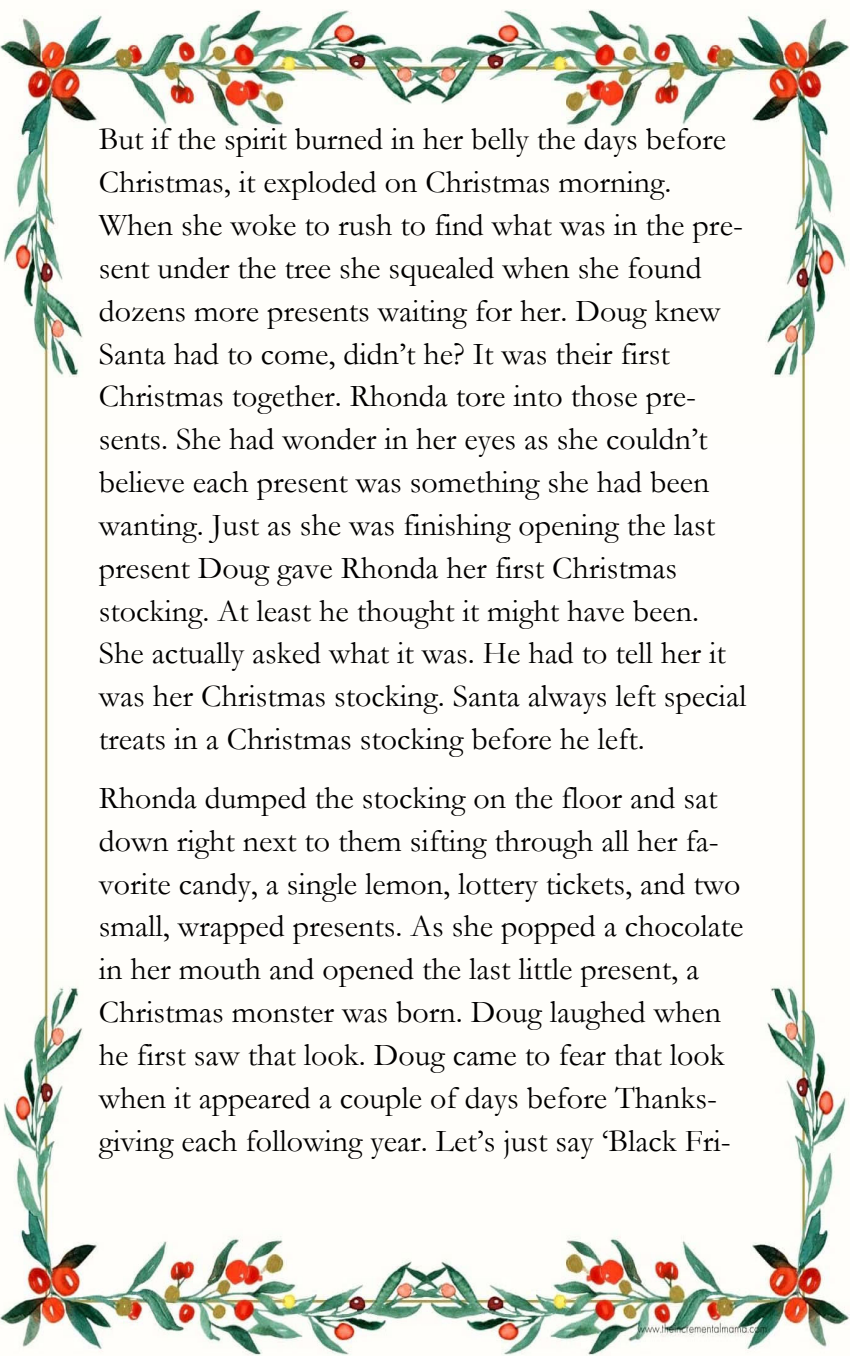


brought Rhonda home to witness the family tree. The tree was massive. Under its branches were tens of wrapped presents. Christmas lights were throughout the house with a distant stereo player tossing Christmas tunes out for everyone's enjoyment. This was weeks before Christmas itself. This was just the preparation phase.

Her eyes were wide, and she was in actual disbelief as they left. She had asked him what he was getting for Christmas and which presents were his. Doug had laughed at the questions. He told her he didn't know. Christmas presents were secret. They were presents. No one knew what they had received until Christmas morning after Santa had come.

Their first Christmas as a married couple blew her mind. He put a large live tree in the center of their one-bedroom walkup right next to the balcony door. Multiple light sets, large selection of new bulbs, and a single present under the tree with her name carefully written on it. Doug thought that one present was going to drive her mad. It was under the tree weeks before Christmas. He wouldn't tell her what was in it. He wouldn't let her open it, shake it, or even guess what was inside. It was a secret. It was then the Christmas spirit began to burn in her belly.





But if the spirit burned in her belly the days before Christmas, it exploded on Christmas morning. When she woke to rush to find what was in the present under the tree she squealed when she found dozens more presents waiting for her. Doug knew Santa had to come, didn't he? It was their first Christmas together. Rhonda tore into those presents. She had wonder in her eyes as she couldn't believe each present was something she had been wanting. Just as she was finishing opening the last present Doug gave Rhonda her first Christmas stocking. At least he thought it might have been. She actually asked what it was. He had to tell her it was her Christmas stocking. Santa always left special treats in a Christmas stocking before he left.

Rhonda dumped the stocking on the floor and sat down right next to them sifting through all her favorite candy, a single lemon, lottery tickets, and two small, wrapped presents. As she popped a chocolate in her mouth and opened the last little present, a Christmas monster was born. Doug laughed when he first saw that look. Doug came to fear that look when it appeared a couple of days before Thanksgiving each following year. Let's just say 'Black Fri-

day' was a real Christmas season opener at their house for years after that first Christmas.



Black Friday after Thanksgiving *Before* the Internet




Chapter 3

It was in this vein and just after seeing *The Santa Clause*, in the middle of all the Christmas hullabaloo, mental self-doubt over his physical looks, and stress over just being a dad, that Rhonda suggested he play Santa Claus.

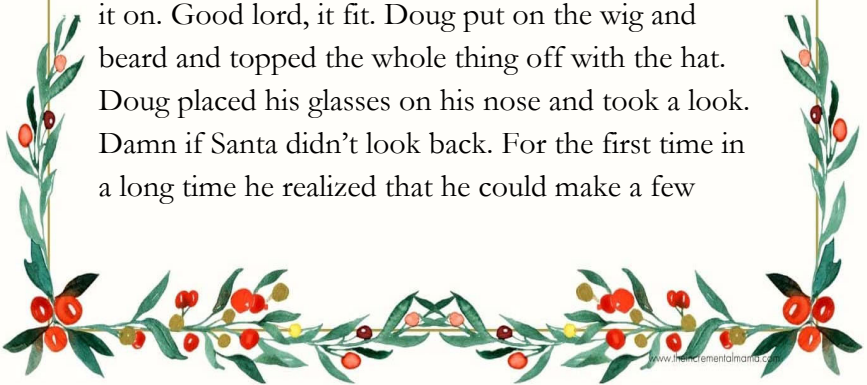
Oh, what a wound to the heart. Not only did he struggle with his looks and question his value as a physical specimen to his wife, she suggests he play Santa Claus. Doug didn't immediately say yes. He didn't storm off in depression and anger, but he didn't say yes. Rhonda grinned. She knew she had him even if he didn't.

Now it wasn't just out of the blue the request came. One of his employees was a Girl Scout den mother. They were having a city-wide gathering of all the Brownie Troops and their Santa Claus had bowed out. His employee had asked him to play Santa to help her out. Talk about a double arrow to the heart. Even his employees found him round and jolly instead of strong and lean. Yeah, Doug was going through a real mid-life crisis. Doug had given one of those maybe, probably not, answers trying to gently

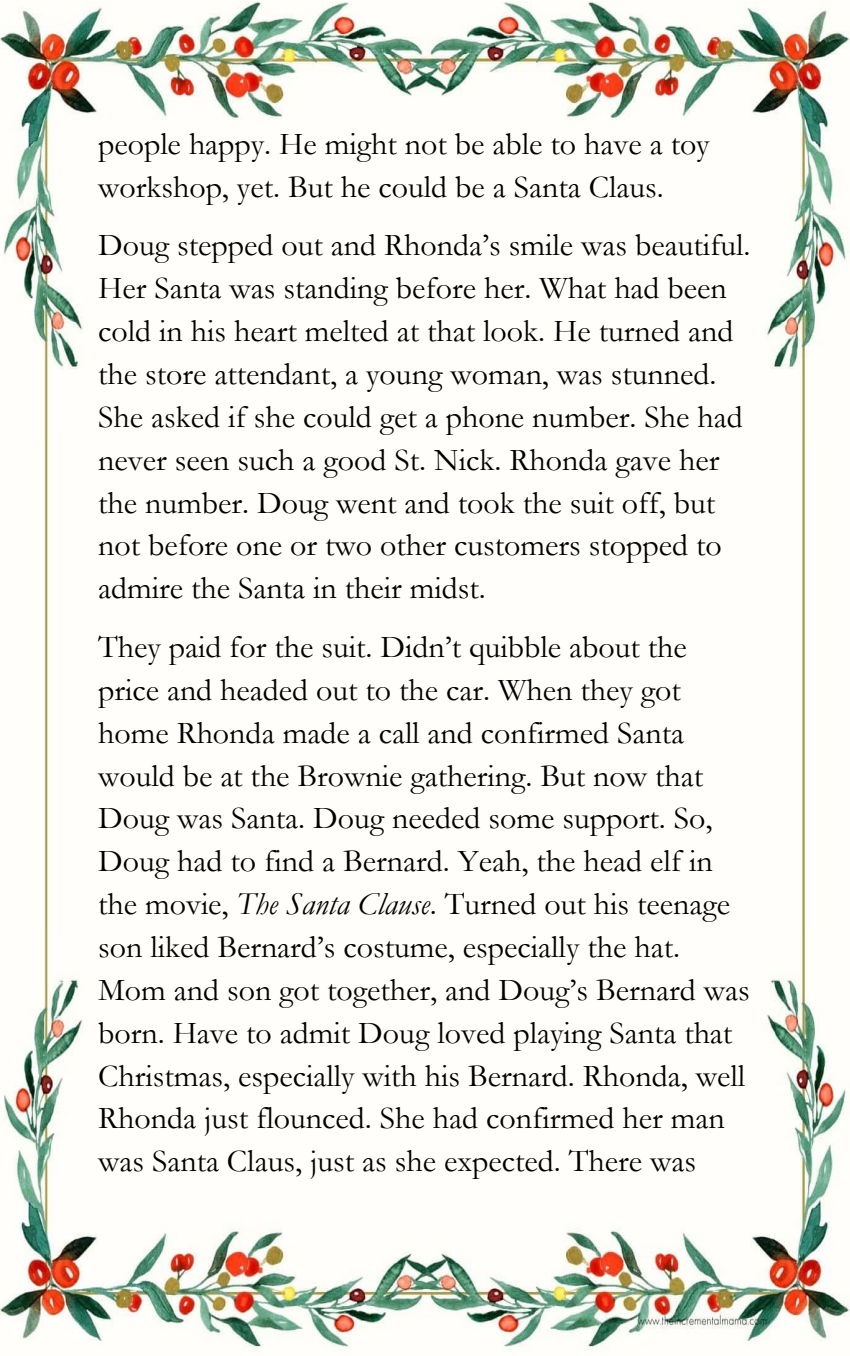


get out of the invitation. So, the employee had gone to a higher authority, Rhonda. Rhonda was a former Brownie. She sold those Girl Scout cookies, and she liked no, loved, Christmas now. Her man was going to play Santa. She told the employee not to worry, it was all good.

Well, the employee provided a Santa suit. Another shiv to the soul, it didn't fit. Not only didn't it fit, it was way too small, and it was a size large. Not to worry. It was time to go to the mall, Rhonda's favorite place, and the party supply store that had custom costumes for Christmas. Doug was in misery internally wondering where his youth had gone. Rhonda was shopping for Christmas! Better yet she was shopping for Santa for Christmas.



High on the wall was a full Santa suit. A nice one, full beard and wig were included. It was the most expensive one in the store. Rhonda had them pull it down and shoved him into the changing room to try it on. Good lord, it fit. Doug put on the wig and beard and topped the whole thing off with the hat. Doug placed his glasses on his nose and took a look. Damn if Santa didn't look back. For the first time in a long time he realized that he could make a few



people happy. He might not be able to have a toy workshop, yet. But he could be a Santa Claus.

Doug stepped out and Rhonda's smile was beautiful. Her Santa was standing before her. What had been cold in his heart melted at that look. He turned and the store attendant, a young woman, was stunned. She asked if she could get a phone number. She had never seen such a good St. Nick. Rhonda gave her the number. Doug went and took the suit off, but not before one or two other customers stopped to admire the Santa in their midst.

They paid for the suit. Didn't quibble about the price and headed out to the car. When they got home Rhonda made a call and confirmed Santa would be at the Brownie gathering. But now that Doug was Santa. Doug needed some support. So, Doug had to find a Bernard. Yeah, the head elf in the movie, *The Santa Clause*. Turned out his teenage son liked Bernard's costume, especially the hat.

Mom and son got together, and Doug's Bernard was born. Have to admit Doug loved playing Santa that Christmas, especially with his Bernard. Rhonda, well Rhonda just flounced. She had confirmed her man was Santa Claus, just as she expected. There was

nothing more to be said. But playing Santa didn't end with the first performance.



David Krumholtz in *The Santa Clause*

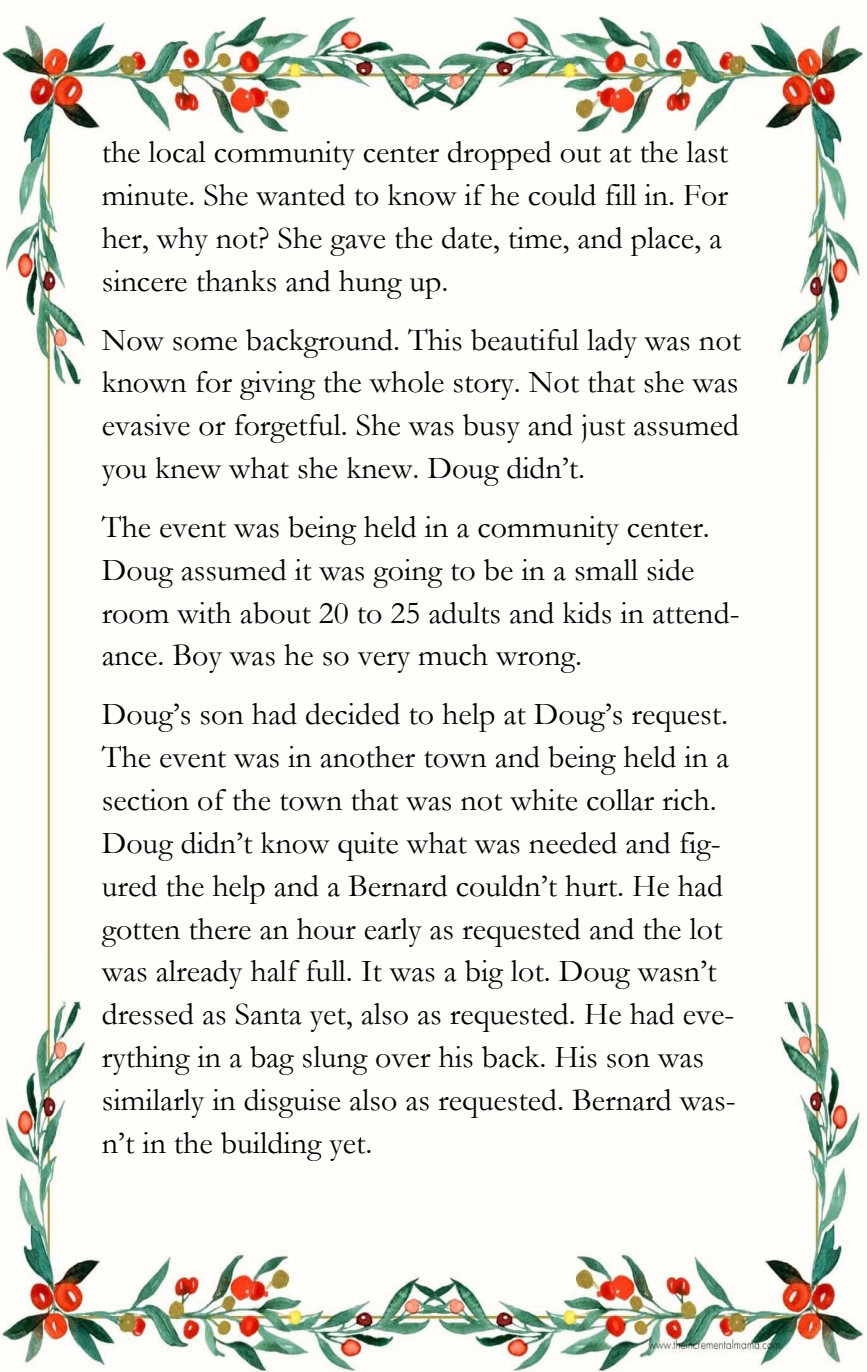


Chapter 4

It was a few years later in another state and another town. St. Augustine to be precise. Doug had participated in more than a few community events as Santa Claus. However, Christmas was coming. His good friend was herself an avid community volunteer. She had been giving her time and energy to many of the good causes in St. Augustine. Doug was amazed at the number of organizations she volunteered to support. He was sure no one had the time she gave to these community services, but there she was doing it.

Since Doug had accepted his Claus personality more than a few people had asked if he ever played the character in public, including his good friend. He had, but nothing professional. It was sporadic and as needed. He did, however, always wear the hat after December 1st whenever he went out. It made for more than one enjoyable smile in many stores and restaurants.

While he was prepping for Christmas once again and wondering if he was going to do any formal events his good friend called. The long-time Santa at

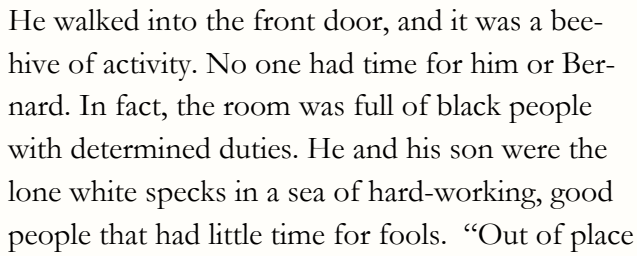


the local community center dropped out at the last minute. She wanted to know if he could fill in. For her, why not? She gave the date, time, and place, a sincere thanks and hung up.

Now some background. This beautiful lady was not known for giving the whole story. Not that she was evasive or forgetful. She was busy and just assumed you knew what she knew. Doug didn't.

The event was being held in a community center. Doug assumed it was going to be in a small side room with about 20 to 25 adults and kids in attendance. Boy was he so very much wrong.

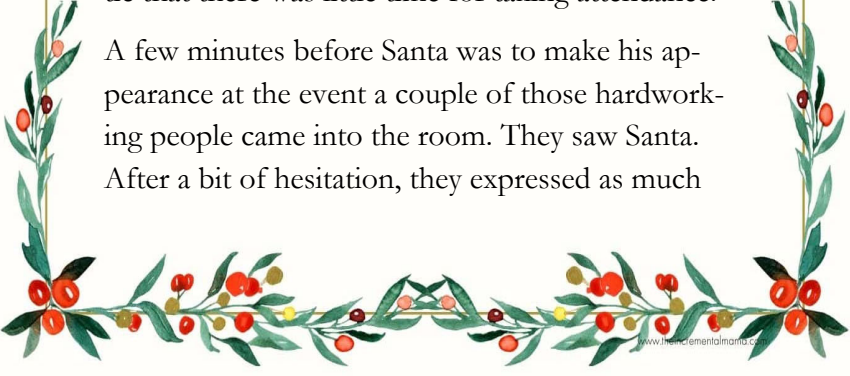
Doug's son had decided to help at Doug's request. The event was in another town and being held in a section of the town that was not white collar rich. Doug didn't know quite what was needed and figured the help and a Bernard couldn't hurt. He had gotten there an hour early as requested and the lot was already half full. It was a big lot. Doug wasn't dressed as Santa yet, also as requested. He had everything in a bag slung over his back. His son was similarly in disguise also as requested. Bernard wasn't in the building yet.

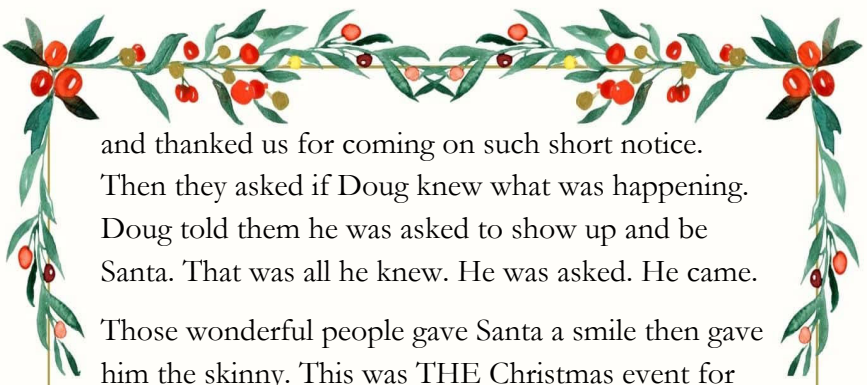


He walked into the front door, and it was a beehive of activity. No one had time for him or Bernard. In fact, the room was full of black people with determined duties. He and his son were the lone white specks in a sea of hard-working, good people that had little time for fools. “Out of place and probably in the wrong space” were his first thoughts.

Suddenly a busy, no-nonsense woman moved forward. She introduced herself quickly and just as quickly moved him and his son into a side room and told us to get ready. They would come and get us when it was time. She turned around, closed the door and left both Doug and his son bewildered. Not wanting to cross or disappoint this very determined woman, Doug became Santa and his son became Bernard. No, Doug didn't remember his good friend even giving an appearance during the event, although she may have. It was just that hectic that there was little time for taking attendance.

A few minutes before Santa was to make his appearance at the event a couple of those hardworking people came into the room. They saw Santa. After a bit of hesitation, they expressed as much

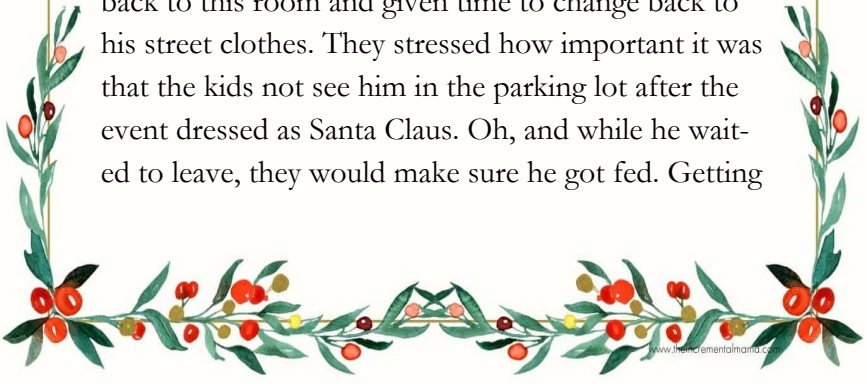




and thanked us for coming on such short notice. Then they asked if Doug knew what was happening. Doug told them he was asked to show up and be Santa. That was all he knew. He was asked. He came.

Those wonderful people gave Santa a smile then gave him the skinny. This was THE Christmas event for this community. For many of the families and kids in the audience, this was their Christmas. They couldn't afford Christmas trees, or presents, many couldn't even afford small decorations. It was very important that there be a Santa Claus for these people. The kids had to have hope and believe. This community needed to believe that there was hope. Doug suddenly felt the weight of being Santa.

They told Doug that very shortly someone would come and take him to the door of the main hall. When he heard the song 'Here Comes Santa Claus' he was to enter the room and take his chair. When his part of the event was over, he would be taken back to this room and given time to change back to his street clothes. They stressed how important it was that the kids not see him in the parking lot after the event dressed as Santa Claus. Oh, and while he waited to leave, they would make sure he got fed. Getting

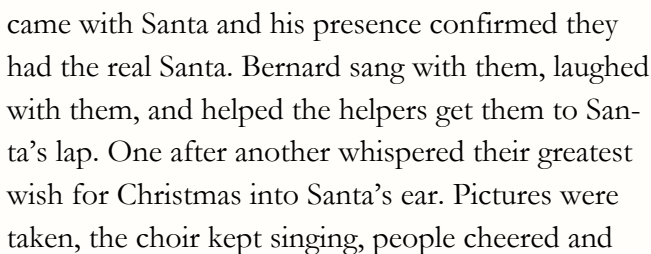


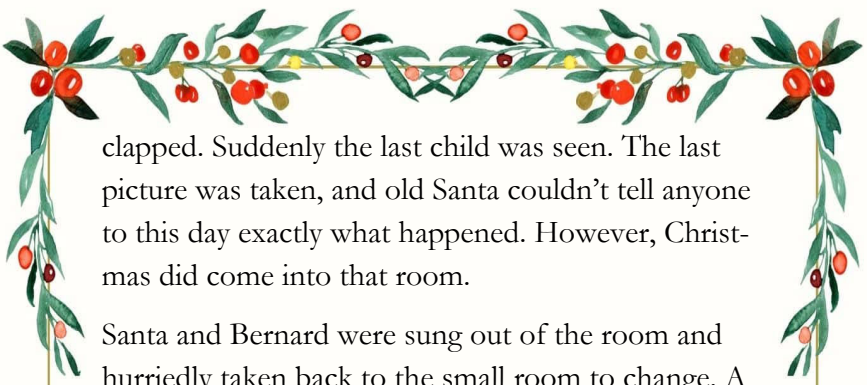


fed. Sounded good to Doug. He and Bernard were in.

They left and very shortly another volunteer came in to get them. Santa and Bernard were led forward with a bit of trepidation and concern that they give a good show. They stood just outside the door of the main hall and sure enough 'Here Comes Santa Claus' started playing, but it wasn't a recording on a speaker system. It was a whole damn choir. An actual choir was singing the song. The door burst open. He and Bernard stepped sharply into the room and were greeted by over 300 hundred men, women, children, families, friends, babies, and helpers. It took everything in Santa's legs to propel him forward to the red shrouded throne set in the middle of the room atop a small pedestal.

Oh, the children lined up. They lined up and the line was so long. Bernard was in his element. The kids knew Bernard. They were just delighted he came with Santa and his presence confirmed they had the real Santa. Bernard sang with them, laughed with them, and helped the helpers get them to Santa's lap. One after another whispered their greatest wish for Christmas into Santa's ear. Pictures were taken, the choir kept singing, people cheered and



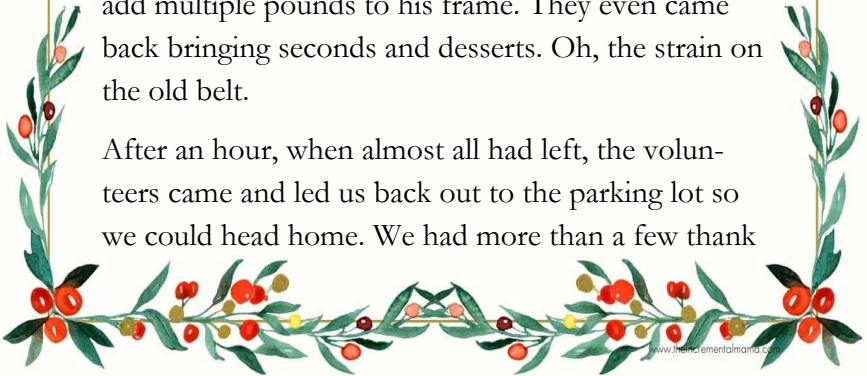


clapped. Suddenly the last child was seen. The last picture was taken, and old Santa couldn't tell anyone to this day exactly what happened. However, Christmas did come into that room.

Santa and Bernard were sung out of the room and hurriedly taken back to the small room to change. A small lady stood guard outside to ensure no looky loos tried to disturb the magic that happened. We quickly changed and hid our Christmas clothes back into the bag. We heard a flurry of people lining up to get the food that had been prepared for the community. We heard laughter, happiness and goodwill filter through the small door between us and those wonderful people.

After most had been fed a nice woman came in the door with the largest plates of food he had ever seen. Good food. Homemade food. Food made by mostly mothers and a few dads that knew how to cook. Food that would keep Santa warm for months and add multiple pounds to his frame. They even came back bringing seconds and desserts. Oh, the strain on the old belt.

After an hour, when almost all had left, the volunteers came and led us back out to the parking lot so we could head home. We had more than a few thank



you' s and another plate to take with us. As we walked back to our car to head home Doug stopped to get his car keys out. In that moment he looked up and saw a small mother holding her child's hand. She was looking back at him with a sad smile. The child was dancing around so excited about Christmas. The mother looked Doug directly in the eye and mouthed 'Thank You'. Then she turned and led her small child back to her life. It was the best, most heartfelt thank you he had ever received. That simple act warmed his heart for the entire Christmas season.

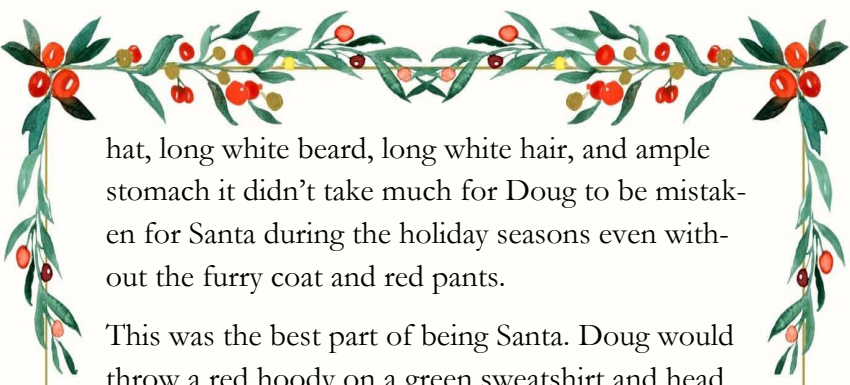




Chapter 5

Playing Santa became a yearly habit, encouraged if not participated in by Rhonda. Even as the girth expanded, reduced, and expanded again Doug continued to wear the original suit bought all those years ago. He attended family Christmases, impromptu meetings, and even served a few stints as a community organization Santa for different functions. Nothing was ever formalized. It just wasn't right to charge anyone to see Santa. Plus, Doug wasn't really an actor. He didn't have a set piece. After the kids gave their wishes in his ear or he handed out the highly anticipated presents, his shtick was done. It was awkward waiting around and watching others look at him as if in anticipation of some ethereal magic yet to happen.

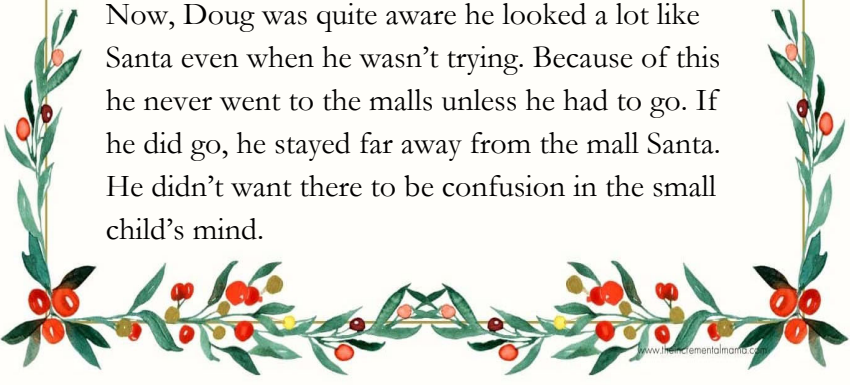
No matter what though, on December 1st of each year Doug traded in his cowboy or baseball cap for the Santa hat. He wore it until December 24th at midnight then put it away for the following year. The Santa hat seemed enough as the years wore on. Doug decided to grow his own beard and wear it year-round. Surprised him. Rhonda liked the beard. He was sure she would insist it be shaved. Nope. She liked it like she liked his long hair style. So, with a red

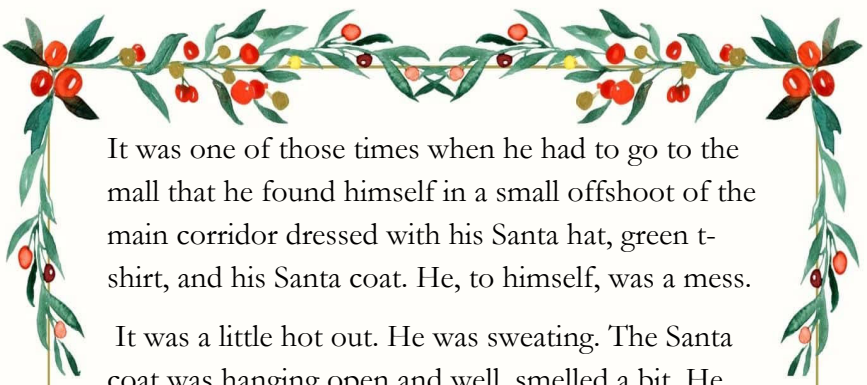


hat, long white beard, long white hair, and ample stomach it didn't take much for Doug to be mistaken for Santa during the holiday seasons even without the furry coat and red pants.

This was the best part of being Santa. Doug would throw a red hood on a green sweatshirt and head out. Once in a while, just for fun he threw the Santa coat over his shoulders. Drove Rhonda nuts. When they went shopping at Christmas, she usually shopped at least 2 aisles over. While she didn't mind Doug being Santa, she wasn't your Mrs. Claus. She refused to wear any sort of Mrs. Claus hat or clothing. Christmas tree earrings, the occasional red top, maybe a long green skirt. But she really didn't want to appear as an old lady, no matter how great the honor.

Some of the best times were when Doug went to the stores alone. Often those alone times were when he was shopping for Rhonda's presents. Now, Doug was quite aware he looked a lot like Santa even when he wasn't trying. Because of this he never went to the malls unless he had to go. If he did go, he stayed far away from the mall Santa. He didn't want there to be confusion in the small child's mind.



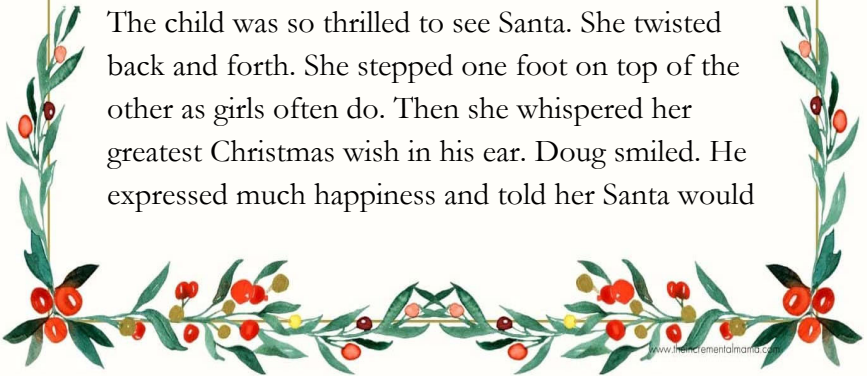


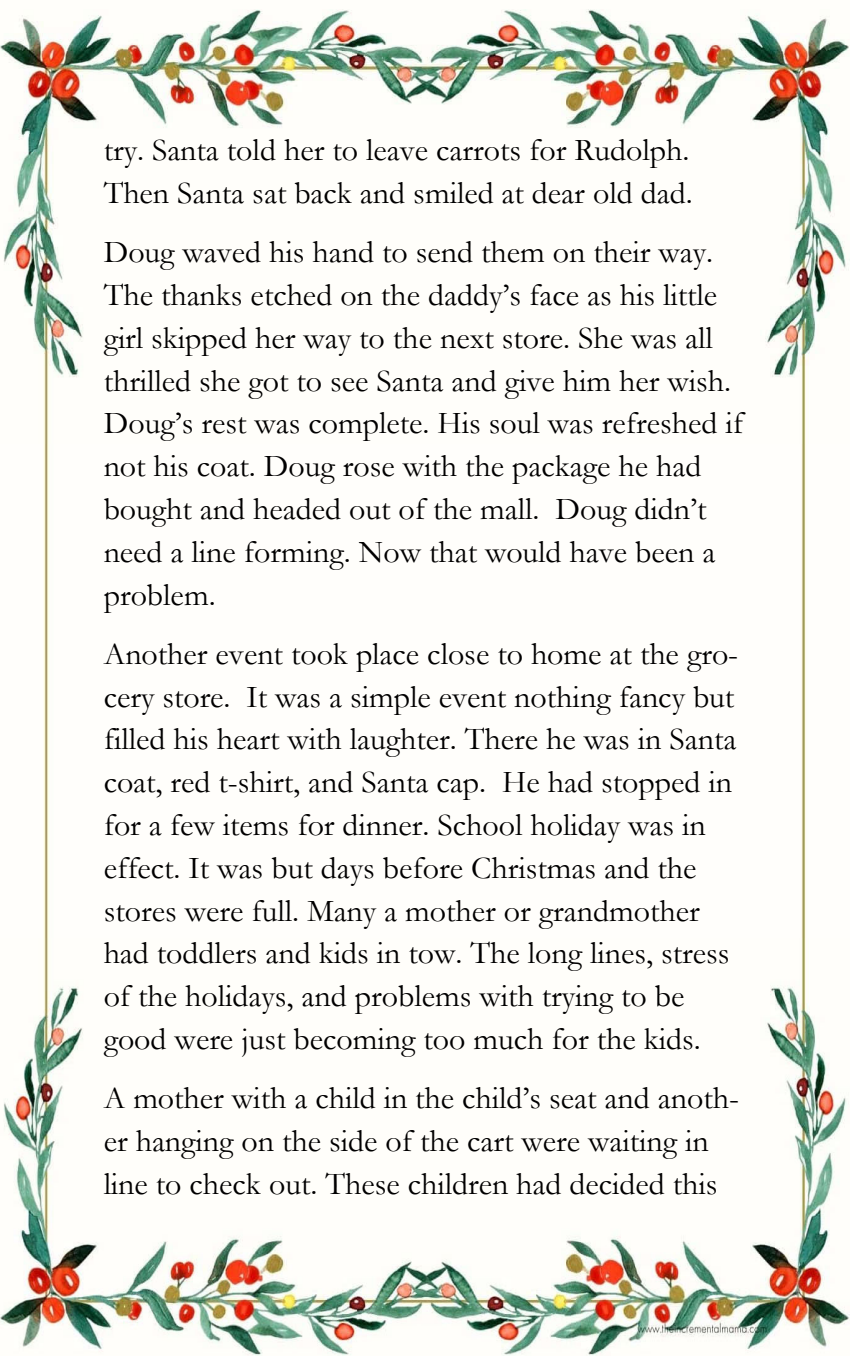
It was one of those times when he had to go to the mall that he found himself in a small offshoot of the main corridor dressed with his Santa hat, green t-shirt, and his Santa coat. He, to himself, was a mess.

It was a little hot out. He was sweating. The Santa coat was hanging open and well, smelled a bit. He was relaxing on one of the many benches between a fake fern and a garbage can. A harried father turned the corner from the main corridor to his little offshoot. Holding on tight to her father's finger was a small little girl dressed in pink and white. She saw me first. The eyes lit up and the smile appeared. She pulled on her daddy's hand.

He looked up and gave me an exasperated smile of hope. They walked quickly up to me, the dad mentioning something about the long line, stressed for time, and needing to see Santa. The blue eyes held him in her embrace. Doug leaned down and said hello while waving at the dad to be quiet.

The child was so thrilled to see Santa. She twisted back and forth. She stepped one foot on top of the other as girls often do. Then she whispered her greatest Christmas wish in his ear. Doug smiled. He expressed much happiness and told her Santa would



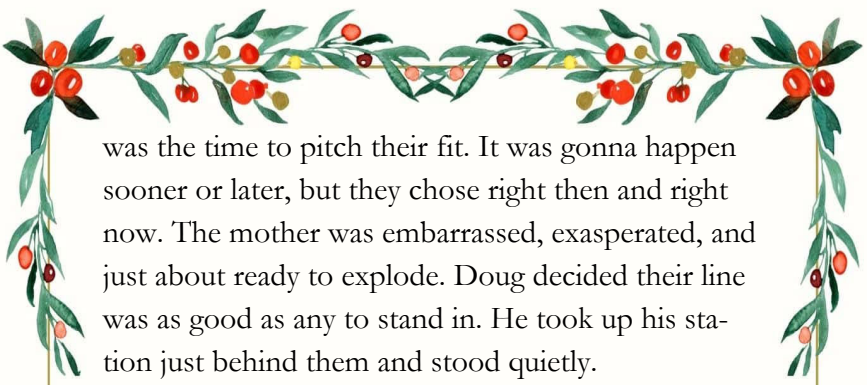


try. Santa told her to leave carrots for Rudolph.
Then Santa sat back and smiled at dear old dad.

Doug waved his hand to send them on their way.
The thanks etched on the daddy's face as his little
girl skipped her way to the next store. She was all
thrilled she got to see Santa and give him her wish.
Doug's rest was complete. His soul was refreshed if
not his coat. Doug rose with the package he had
bought and headed out of the mall. Doug didn't
need a line forming. Now that would have been a
problem.

Another event took place close to home at the gro-
cery store. It was a simple event nothing fancy but
filled his heart with laughter. There he was in Santa
coat, red t-shirt, and Santa cap. He had stopped in
for a few items for dinner. School holiday was in
effect. It was but days before Christmas and the
stores were full. Many a mother or grandmother
had toddlers and kids in tow. The long lines, stress
of the holidays, and problems with trying to be
good were just becoming too much for the kids.

A mother with a child in the child's seat and another
hanging on the side of the cart were waiting in
line to check out. These children had decided this




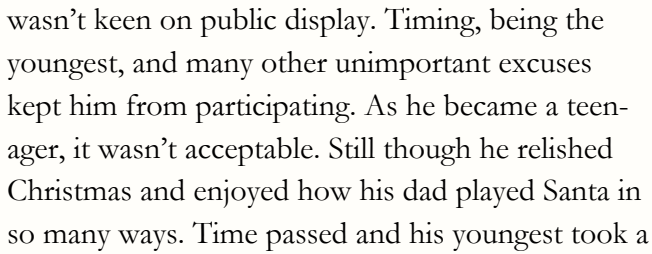
was the time to pitch their fit. It was gonna happen sooner or later, but they chose right then and right now. The mother was embarrassed, exasperated, and just about ready to explode. Doug decided their line was as good as any to stand in. He took up his station just behind them and stood quietly.

The older child hanging onto the side of the cart noticed first. His mouth went from fully open to fully shut in moments. His brother had his mouth open and his eyes closed until his brother pulled on his shirt. The babe first looked at his brother and then at me. The look in his eyes exceeded the width of the mouth that was expressing discontent just seconds before. His mother was confused and turned to look behind her. She was a bit taken aback, but then got into the moment.

Doug leaned in and said Merry Christmas. He asked what they wanted for Christmas and wondered if they were being good boys for their mother. Both nodded quietly and stared at the Santa behind them. The line moved. The mother turned and mouthed a thank you and Merry Christmas. Doug just smiled and made his way to the checkout. Good deed done.

Now Doug's youngest son didn't get involved in all the Santa events, usually. He loved Christmas but

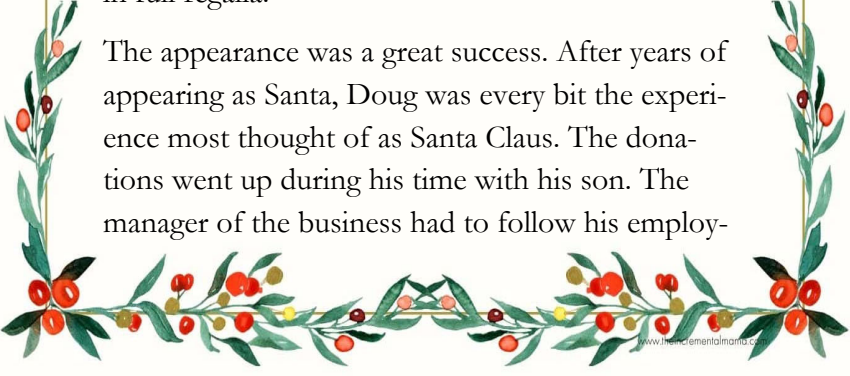


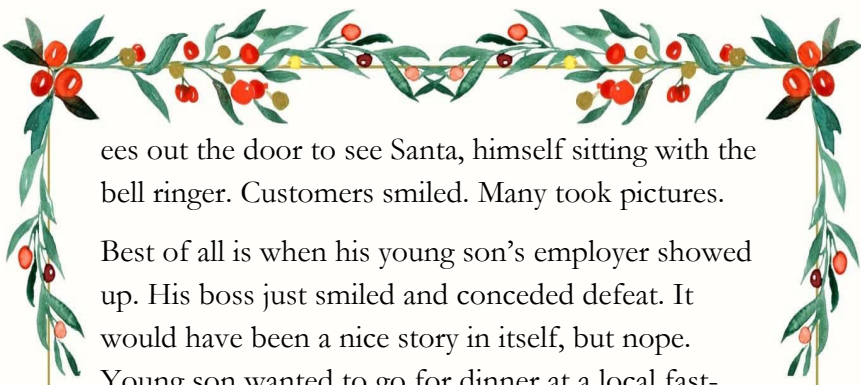


wasn't keen on public display. Timing, being the youngest, and many other unimportant excuses kept him from participating. As he became a teenager, it wasn't acceptable. Still though he relished Christmas and enjoyed how his dad played Santa in so many ways. Time passed and his youngest took a job as a bell ringer. You know those intrepid people that stand outside businesses and ring a bell hoping you will donate to a charity by placing a few bills in a pot.

Well, the bell ringer job required that his youngest wear an elf hat and be a bit Christmasy. He enjoyed the gig and was congratulated on how well he was doing. Being a proud son, he often took the time to express that he got his abilities from Santa himself. Good natured ribbing ensued, and he told them that on the last day of bell ringing he would bring Ol' Saint Nick himself to his stand. His son reached out to his dad and Doug agreed to appear in full regalia.

The appearance was a great success. After years of appearing as Santa, Doug was every bit the experience most thought of as Santa Claus. The donations went up during his time with his son. The manager of the business had to follow his employ-

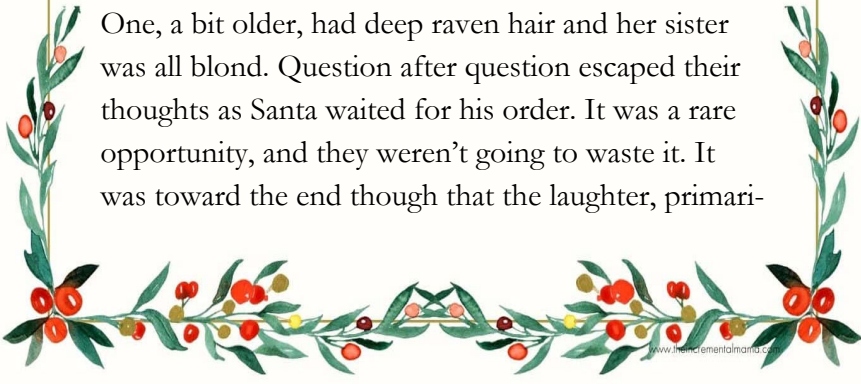




ees out the door to see Santa, himself sitting with the bell ringer. Customers smiled. Many took pictures.

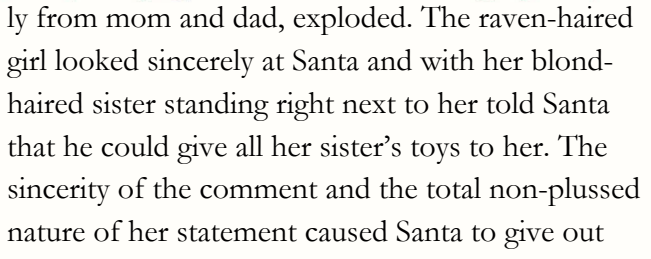
Best of all is when his young son's employer showed up. His boss just smiled and conceded defeat. It would have been a nice story in itself, but nope. Young son wanted to go for dinner at a local fast-food restaurant. Doug agreed to go and pulled up to the restaurant dressed as Santa while exiting a small, all red, auto. They went inside together. Not really together. Santa had to talk to more than one child in the parking lot.

It was there in the diner that his young son really understood the fun and joy his dad brought as Santa. Fathers, mothers, the staff, and especially the kids all began to laugh and giggle as soon as he walked in. Heads turned and more than a few intrepid youngsters stepped forward to put in their last-minute requests. Santa was held captive by two young girls of the same family.



One, a bit older, had deep raven hair and her sister was all blond. Question after question escaped their thoughts as Santa waited for his order. It was a rare opportunity, and they weren't going to waste it. It was toward the end though that the laughter, primari-

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ly from mom and dad, exploded. The raven-haired girl looked sincerely at Santa and with her blond-haired sister standing right next to her told Santa that he could give all her sister's toys to her. The sincerity of the comment and the total non-plussed nature of her statement caused Santa to give out one of his best HO, HO, HO's. Mom recovered quickly enough to end the conversation and Santa picked up his goodies, wished all a Merry Christmas and headed back out the door.

It was outside when his son started just chatting to his dad about how much people interacted with his dad when he was Santa. The son exclaimed how cool it was. He also said it was nice being an elf next to the old man. Doug did note in his own unexpressed thoughts that his six foot plus son was a bit tall for an elf. But from then on the son never shied away when his dad went out on Christmas with that old Santa hat and often played the best elf he could.



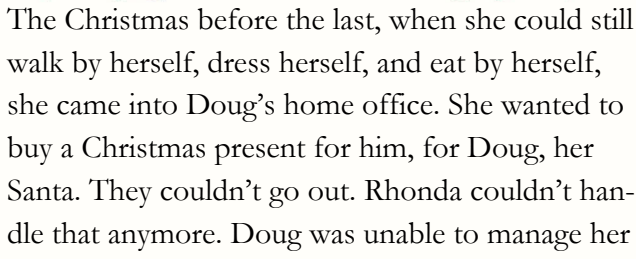


Chapter 6

Doug reflected on these happy thoughts as he placed one more hot chocolate chip cookie on the wax paper for cooling. There were 52 years of warm Christmas memories made with Rhonda, fifty of them were made while she was his wife. There were stories inside stories. There were many individual stories made each Christmas. Christmas itself had become a marker of their time together. A touchstone of each year in their life.

Doug pondered that and invariably his thoughts turned to the last Christmases together. As he did his cheeriness faltered. The room didn't smell as sweet. The Christmas music turned to a din.

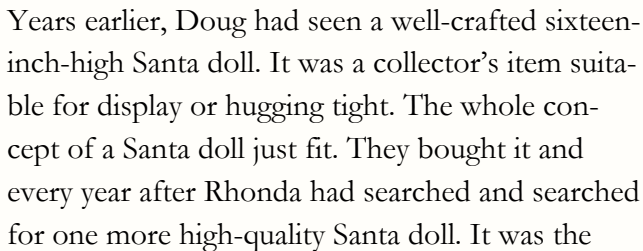
Those last few Christmases were not good. As her dementia progressed Rhonda was having a hard time even understanding Christmas and the Christmas season. She knew it was important to her, but she often couldn't remember why. When she did remember it made her sad, so sad, that she couldn't participate. She wanted to go shopping, pick out presents, decorate the house. Rhonda's face had always been a mirror to her thoughts. The sadness expressed there just tore at Doug's heart.

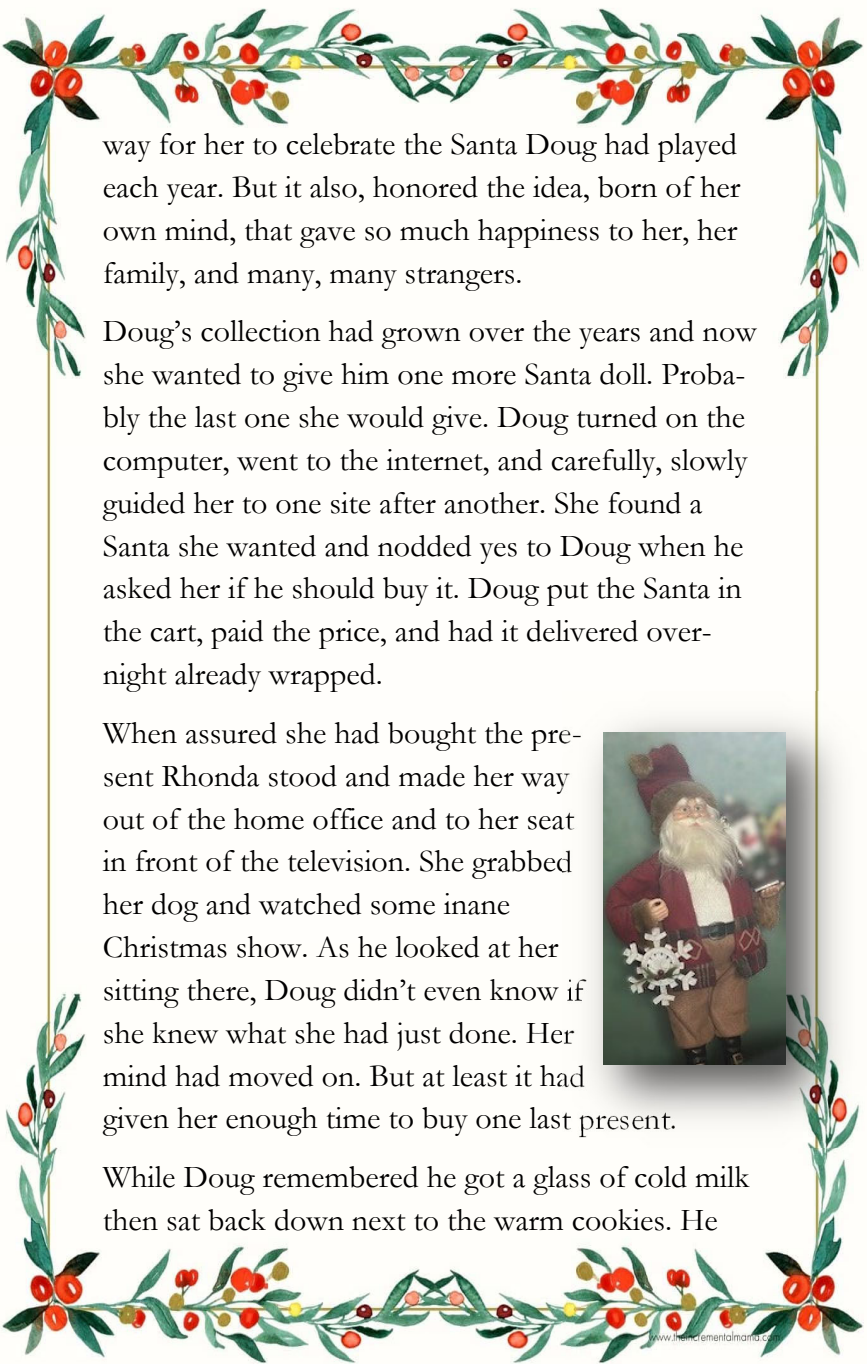


The Christmas before the last, when she could still walk by herself, dress herself, and eat by herself, she came into Doug's home office. She wanted to buy a Christmas present for him, for Doug, her Santa. They couldn't go out. Rhonda couldn't handle that anymore. Doug was unable to manage her when she did go out anyway. They had to buy the present online and have it delivered.

Rhonda knew it couldn't be a secret present anymore. Doug would have to know what she bought him. So, they decided to use the Christmas gift rules her family had used so many years before. Doug would tell her what he wanted. Then he would help her find it online. Then they would have it delivered already wrapped. Rhonda would then take the gift and put it under the tree. On Christmas morning Doug would open the last gift Rhonda would give him.

Rhonda wanted to give Doug one more Santa doll. Years earlier, Doug had seen a well-crafted sixteen-inch-high Santa doll. It was a collector's item suitable for display or hugging tight. The whole concept of a Santa doll just fit. They bought it and every year after Rhonda had searched and searched for one more high-quality Santa doll. It was the





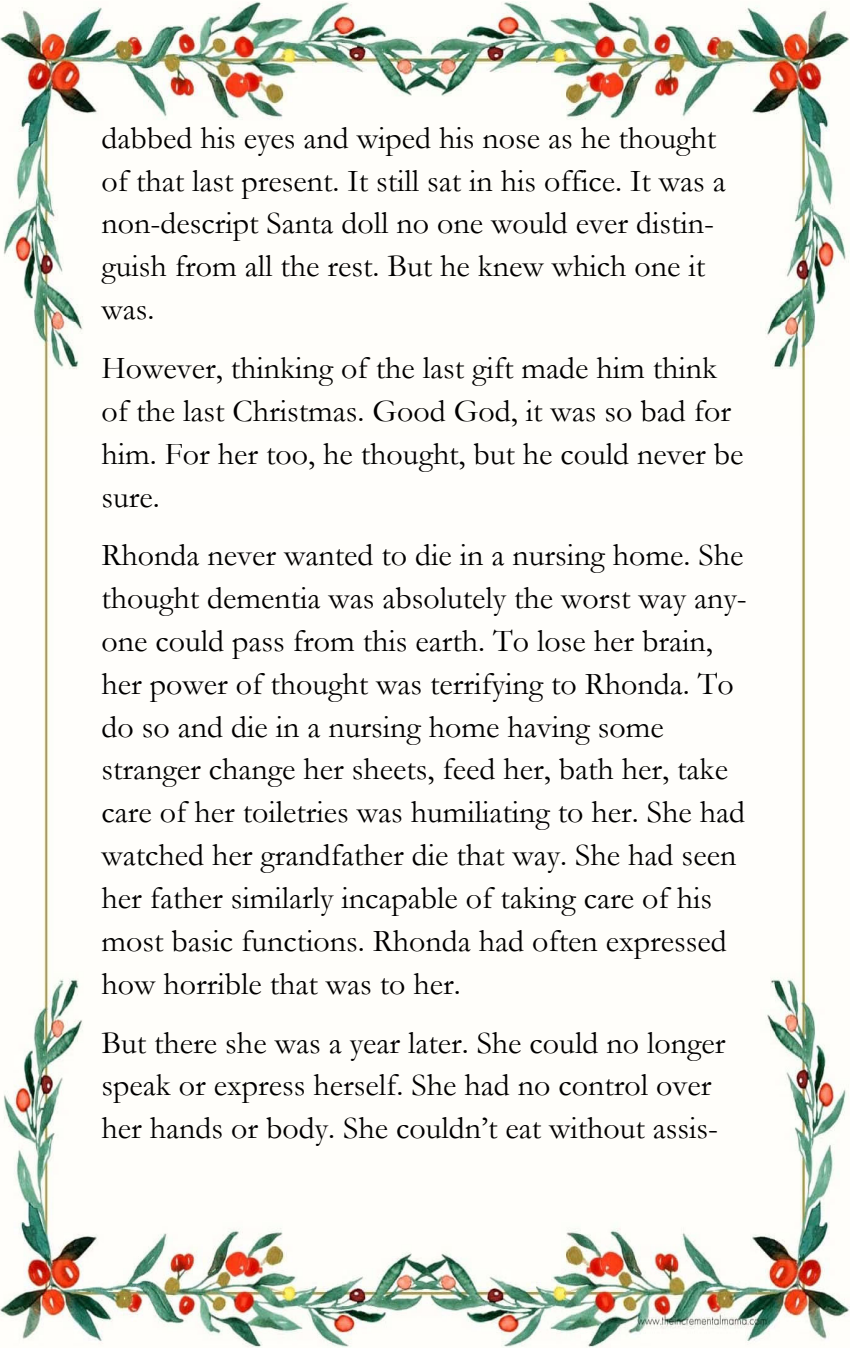
way for her to celebrate the Santa Doug had played each year. But it also, honored the idea, born of her own mind, that gave so much happiness to her, her family, and many, many strangers.

Doug's collection had grown over the years and now she wanted to give him one more Santa doll. Probably the last one she would give. Doug turned on the computer, went to the internet, and carefully, slowly guided her to one site after another. She found a Santa she wanted and nodded yes to Doug when he asked her if he should buy it. Doug put the Santa in the cart, paid the price, and had it delivered overnight already wrapped.

When assured she had bought the present Rhonda stood and made her way out of the home office and to her seat in front of the television. She grabbed her dog and watched some inane Christmas show. As he looked at her sitting there, Doug didn't even know if she knew what she had just done. Her mind had moved on. But at least it had given her enough time to buy one last present.



While Doug remembered he got a glass of cold milk then sat back down next to the warm cookies. He

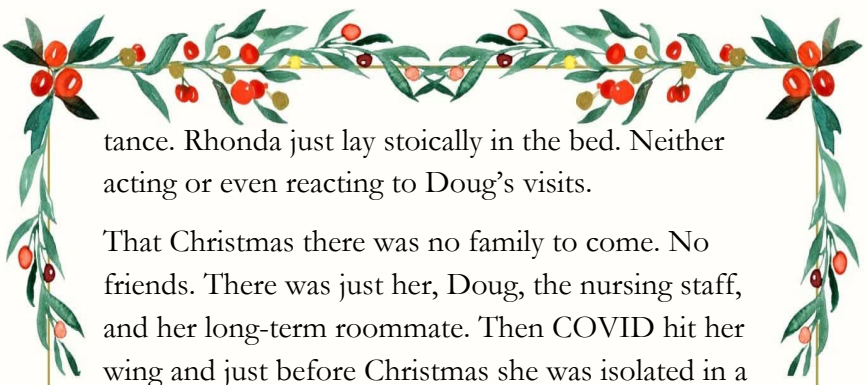


dabbed his eyes and wiped his nose as he thought of that last present. It still sat in his office. It was a non-descript Santa doll no one would ever distinguish from all the rest. But he knew which one it was.

However, thinking of the last gift made him think of the last Christmas. Good God, it was so bad for him. For her too, he thought, but he could never be sure.

Rhonda never wanted to die in a nursing home. She thought dementia was absolutely the worst way anyone could pass from this earth. To lose her brain, her power of thought was terrifying to Rhonda. To do so and die in a nursing home having some stranger change her sheets, feed her, bath her, take care of her toiletries was humiliating to her. She had watched her grandfather die that way. She had seen her father similarly incapable of taking care of his most basic functions. Rhonda had often expressed how horrible that was to her.

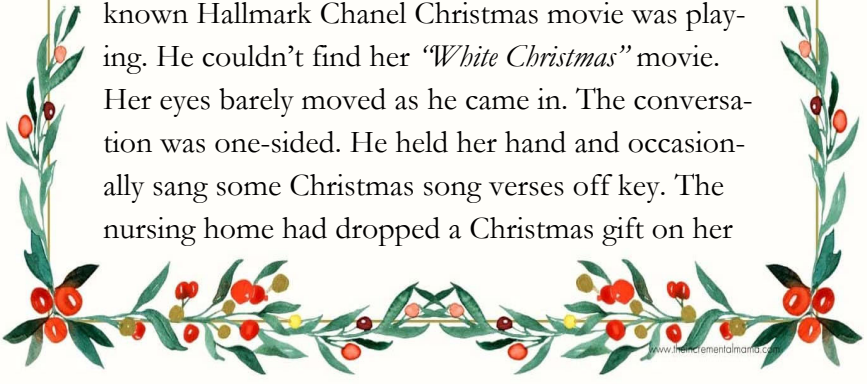
But there she was a year later. She could no longer speak or express herself. She had no control over her hands or body. She couldn't eat without assis-



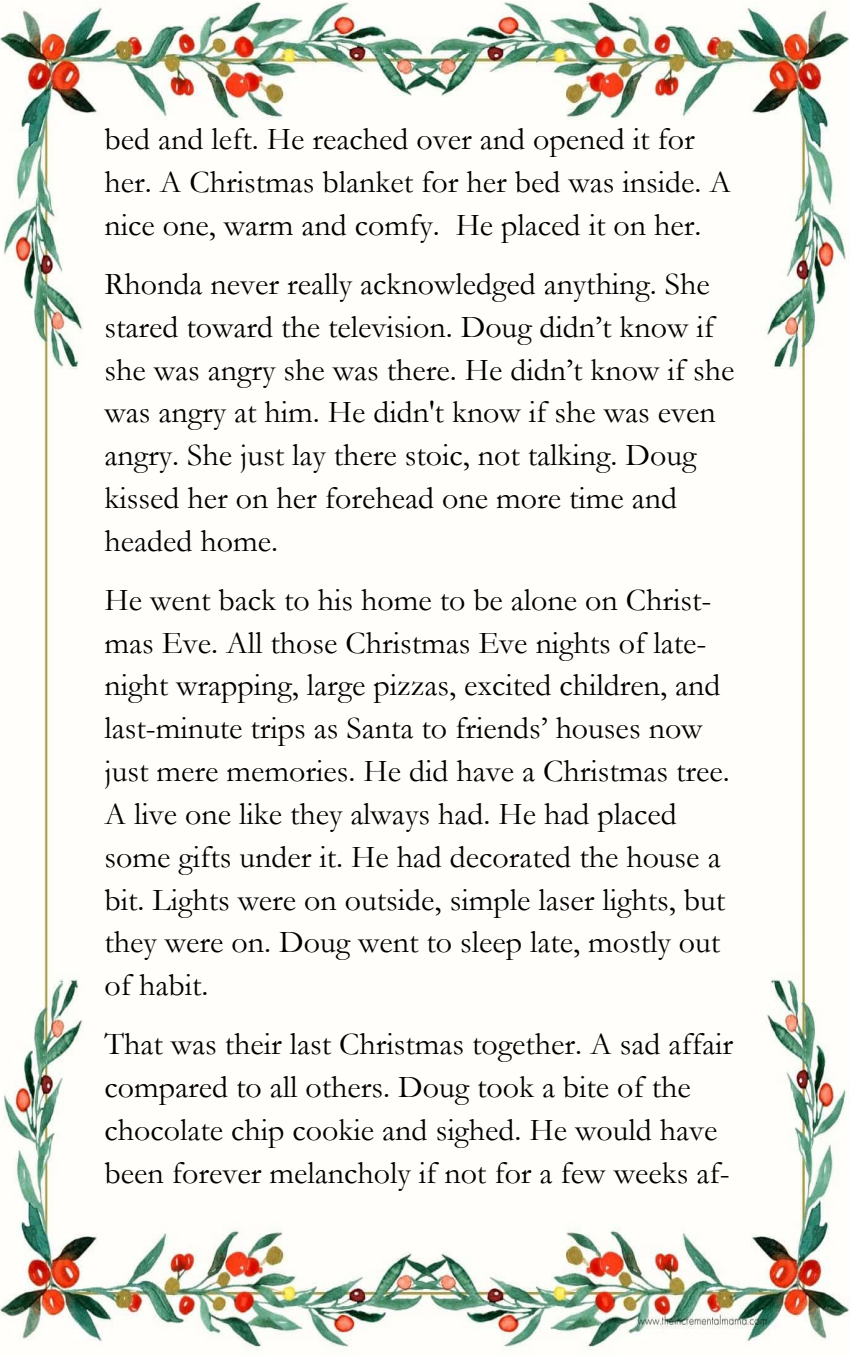
tance. Rhonda just lay stoically in the bed. Neither acting or even reacting to Doug's visits.

That Christmas there was no family to come. No friends. There was just her, Doug, the nursing staff, and her long-term roommate. Then COVID hit her wing and just before Christmas she was isolated in a distant ward with no one she knew around her or in attendance. This is where Doug found her on Christmas Eve.

Doug brought her some freshly baked Christmas cookies, although he knew he would have to crumble them up and feed them to her himself. He brought a self-made Christmas card and some flowers. That was all he could get for her anymore. She couldn't really eat chocolate, her favorite. Clothes, jewelry, and gadgets were out. A Christmas tree was nigh impossible. No grand gestures, no presents, no carols, no shopping this year for Rhonda.



The television was on. Doug made sure some unknown Hallmark Chanel Christmas movie was playing. He couldn't find her "*White Christmas*" movie. Her eyes barely moved as he came in. The conversation was one-sided. He held her hand and occasionally sang some Christmas song verses off key. The nursing home had dropped a Christmas gift on her

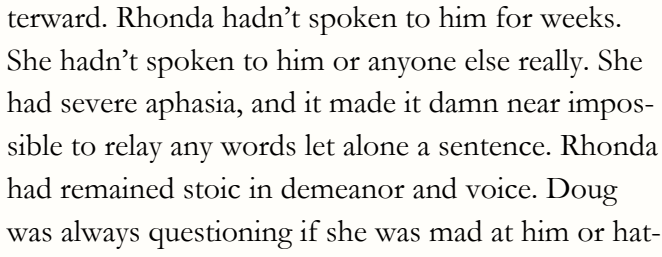


bed and left. He reached over and opened it for her. A Christmas blanket for her bed was inside. A nice one, warm and comfy. He placed it on her.

Rhonda never really acknowledged anything. She stared toward the television. Doug didn't know if she was angry she was there. He didn't know if she was angry at him. He didn't know if she was even angry. She just lay there stoic, not talking. Doug kissed her on her forehead one more time and headed home.

He went back to his home to be alone on Christmas Eve. All those Christmas Eve nights of late-night wrapping, large pizzas, excited children, and last-minute trips as Santa to friends' houses now just mere memories. He did have a Christmas tree. A live one like they always had. He had placed some gifts under it. He had decorated the house a bit. Lights were on outside, simple laser lights, but they were on. Doug went to sleep late, mostly out of habit.

That was their last Christmas together. A sad affair compared to all others. Doug took a bite of the chocolate chip cookie and sighed. He would have been forever melancholy if not for a few weeks af-



terward. Rhonda hadn't spoken to him for weeks. She hadn't spoken to him or anyone else really. She had severe aphasia, and it made it damn near impossible to relay any words let alone a sentence. Rhonda had remained stoic in demeanor and voice. Doug was always questioning if she was mad at him or hated him for putting her in the very place she always feared and never wanted.

Then one sunny but cold day not too far removed from Christmas, Doug had come to visit once more. Rhonda was back in her old room with her roommate and the nurses she knew. Her routine had returned, and the television was tuned to the channel she liked to watch, or in her case, maybe listen. As Doug leaned down to give her a kiss on her forehead, for the first time in a very, very long time she looked with recognition into his eyes. He saw her see him and he held her.

With every bit of will left inside her Rhonda gave her last words. "I love you." She had finally given her Christmas present. It was everything he wanted. Rhonda never spoke again. Her last words on this plain of existence were of love. Her love for him. Cool.



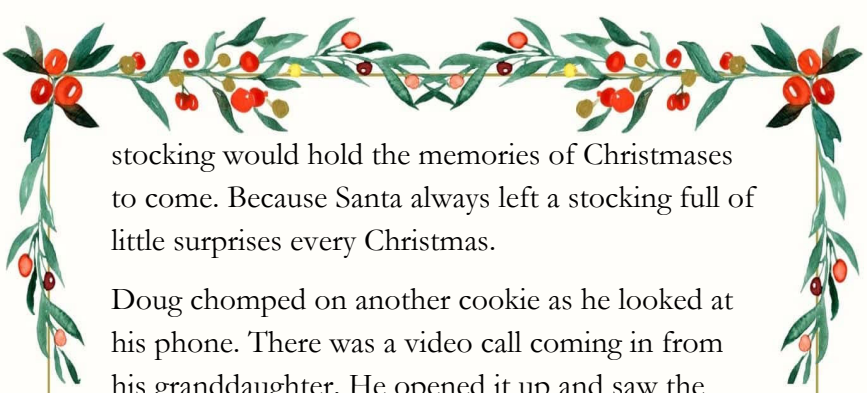


Epilogue

Doug took another bite of cookie. He wiped a tear from his eye once more and waited for the timer to ring and announce the baking of the last batch. Doug could have been sad for ever more around Christmas. Most would understand. But Rhonda wouldn't have wanted it. She wouldn't have stood for it.

In their early days together, Doug had shown her what Christmas could be. Rhonda embraced it for her, Doug, and her family. Later on, Rhonda had created *her* Santa to spread that message. One could focus on their last two Christmases and wallow in the sadness that they had reaped. But to do so would be to ignore the other fifty years of joy and love from those earlier Christmases. That scale just didn't measure up.

Besides Rhonda had left her legacy of joy in her Santa idea and in her Santa reality. Doug had to comply. So, he bought a new Christmas stocking for Rhonda and placed it with the others. It was white. Her red stocking she had for so many years was safely locked away with its memories. The new

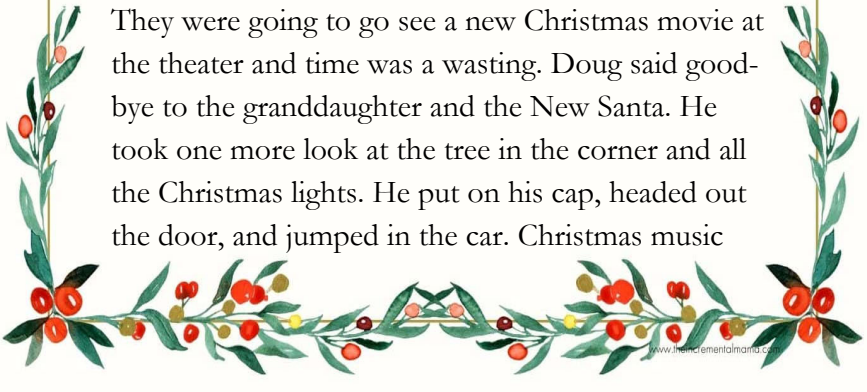


stocking would hold the memories of Christmases to come. Because Santa always left a stocking full of little surprises every Christmas.

Doug chomped on another cookie as he looked at his phone. There was a video call coming in from his granddaughter. He opened it up and saw the beautiful eyes that were so much like Rhonda's. She was smiling and twirling and very much aware her grandpa looked like Santa.

His older son, the former Bernard, came into view. Santa chuckled. Bernard was growing a beard. His dark hair was turning white. He no longer needed padding for a Santa suit. The Christmas tree was already up, and he was making a batch of chocolate chip cookies. He also wore a Santa hat. They laughed and talked about Christmas and presents. Old Santa got an invite to New Santa's house for Christmas. Maybe this year he might go.

But not yet. His young son was waiting by the door. They were going to go see a new Christmas movie at the theater and time was a wasting. Doug said good-bye to the granddaughter and the New Santa. He took one more look at the tree in the corner and all the Christmas lights. He put on his cap, headed out the door, and jumped in the car. Christmas music



blared as his young son and Santa made more Christmas memories for all.

The Granddaughter and her brown eyes.





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 2025

Thank you for your friendship.

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Merry Christmas!