

Tangible Proof

by H. W. Moss

I had spent the last six months sleeping on floors wrapped in a single thin blanket amidst a platoon of thumb-sucking bed-wetters whose idea of social grace was to shove first, ask your name later. Now I looked forward to my first full year of real education with an anticipation usually reserved for Christmas.

But as the doorway shut behind me leaving me incomprehensibly alone, standing there with my lunch pail in my hand, I felt a deep apprehension as I surveyed the room. It was a world I had never seen, one I had only dreamed of, one that was filled with tiny desks and peopled by unknown personality types. It was infused with bright colors and overflowed with variety. Its inhabitants were all similarly attired and all my age and they were all staring at me in wide eyed wonder.

A very old woman with strands of gray in her otherwise shoulder length red hair turned to me and made a presentation gesture with her hand.

“Class,” she said to the thirty or so strangers abruptly silent looking up at me from their seats. “This is Jeremy. Jeremy is going to be in our classroom this year. Would someone like to share their desk with Jeremy?”

An array of hands immediately shot up. It seemed almost everyone wanted to be my friend.

“Please, class. You may share only if you are not already sharing your seat. Everyone who has a seatmate, please put your hand down.”

Ninety percent of the hands dropped. From those still raised I realized I had to select carefully for from among this mob into which I was about to be thrust, a group would emerge who would be fast friends or ardent enemies, bosom buddies or feared bullies, lovers and haters, outsiders, intellectual superiors and inferiors. In short, these were the people with whom I anticipated spending the next dozen years.

“Anderson,” the ancient woman said as I pointed out a black kid. His head and shoulders rode above the sea of others because he was already taller than almost everyone else in the room except the grande dame. She strode with me to his double seated bench. I took my place beside him as she said, “Show Jeremy where rulers and pencils belong.”

Anderson Johnson had a big wide smile and a slender part in his hair that ran along his scalp from front to back. He shifted in his seat to give me room, then lifted the desk top to demonstrate how it operated. He pointed inside. On the right side in front of him was a collection of utensils, a few pieces of notebook paper rudely torn from their spiral bindings and a box of crayons which I immediately coveted. I had a box just like it at home only it was half the size of his and nowhere near as pristine.

“You can share my crayons with me,” he said humbly. And by this one act of generosity I knew a friendship had been born which went beyond that which I had with my siblings from whom I withheld all things that were mine. Anderson could have half my lunch any time.

It was the beginning of the school year, early fall, and the outlook appeared brighter than I had a right to hope. Still, I had no idea kindergarten would be a year of crisis for me.

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It had been bruited about for some time, but I paid no attention to the rumors. With my lunch pail in hand, I settled in at the picnic table beside Anderson, Kelly, Rebecca and Marion who were examining the contents of their lunch boxes with the anticipation of treasure hunters. Candy bars were always consumed first. I discovered an apple, a small bag of potato chips, a plastic bag with a hot dog bun inside. My thermos was filled with hot tomato soup and a white string hung just below the twist top.

I carefully unwound the thermos cap holding the string against the thermos with my thumb. Dangling within the thermos was a warm hot dog which I retrieved. I placed the dog in the bun and untied the thin string's bow. I found a mustard packet and some relish in another plastic sandwich bag.

"I never believed that junk," Anderson said as he bit into his peanut butter and jelly sandwich. "It's all a fake."

"Well, I knew right away," Rebecca explained. "The card read from Mom, Dad and Santa. I mean, come on. That's a dead giveaway."

"We're Jewish," Marion said. "We don't believe in that crap. And we don't go to church on Sunday, we go to synagogue on the Sabbath."

"What day is the Sabbath?" I asked innocently.

"Sundown Friday to sundown Saturday," she replied with evident glee. She was teaching me something I did not know.

"So you don't go to church on Sunday?" My curiosity was piqued.

"Different cultures have venerated deities on different days of the week throughout history," Kelly remarked between popping slices of an orange in his mouth. Kelly was retarded due to congenital hydrocephalus. His head was too large and his brain atrophied.

Although the condition was diagnosed in the second trimester, it was already too late. His brain was damaged and draining the water in vitro did nothing to increase his capacity. He would forever have the intelligence of a third grader. But that was years away, and to us he was articulate and insightful even if he had a big head.

Yet this was totally stunning news to me. Sunday was when Mom took us to church. Dad stayed home and one day I hoped to grow up and do the same. Furthermore, learning there were those who worshiped on a different day meant they were not Christian. This beautiful raven haired girl with her lovely smile and incredible figure sitting beside me, and with whom I wanted to share my apple, did not worship the same god I had been taught to venerate. She was not like me!

“What do you do at Christmas, then?” I asked.

Marion thoughtfully munched a corn chip. “I’ll admit that’s one thing I would like, a Christmas tree. I’ve been over to friends’ houses at Christmas and their trees always smell so good. And they light up and are all sparkly and have a big star at the top. Yes, I would like it if my family got a tree once a year and set it up in the living room.”

I had taken one single bite from my frankfurter when I decided it was time to ask the all important question. “So if you don’t have a Christmas tree, where does Santa put your presents?” I was totally unprepared for the response to this guileless query.

Anderson said, “That’s what we’ve been talking about. There’s no such thing as Santa Claus.”

I was thunder struck. I had just learned other people worship in different ways than me and my family, and now this? How could anybody not believe in Santa? Of course he was real. I had annual tangible proof of that. Admittedly, I had experienced the

phenomenon a mere five times, but nonetheless, I was convinced of his existence by the gifts which were tagged for me under the tree in the morning.

And my brother, was he not brought home Christmas Day from the hospital, our Christmas baby my mother called him, even though he had been born a couple of days prior?

And what, precisely, did they mean, there is no such thing as Santa Claus? Had he died? How could that have happened? Had his sleigh crashed while delivering presents around the world? If so, I thanked my lucky stars for it meant I had received his munificent beneficence, perhaps for the last time, but at least I had gotten my share. Why had I not heard of this tragedy?"

Or did they mean to say he had never existed? In such an event, what about Rudolph? Was Hi-Ho to be thrown out of our lexicon? Was the ringing of sleigh bells nothing more than a warning sound in a blizzard?

And if you extrapolated on the idea that he never existed, that he was pure fabrication, a mythic figure which children were supposed to grow out of, what did that portend for The Easter Bunny and The Tooth Fairy? I dared not take this line of reasoning further into the realm of organized religion where it easily followed, because it would have disastrous consequences for Jesus, the Eucharist, the entire communion ritual to say nothing of the concept of the Trinity.

So instead I said, "I don't believe you."

Anderson looked me squarely in the eye and said, "Listen, Jer, there is no Santa Claus. That's a white person fable that derives directly from pagan winter solstice rituals. It's Indo European in origin and they just feed it to us kids because we're not supposed to

know how presents arrive under the tree. Get it?" He took another bite of his sandwich and munched contentedly.

"I don't believe you."

"It's perfectly obvious when you think about it," Kelly observed. "First there's the song: I saw mommy kissing Santa Claus. They play it every year. Now, do you think your mother is going to kiss some other man? Obviously, Santa is Dad in disguise. Or how about when you show up at the mall and they have Santa ringing a bell asking for money. There are dozens of Santas, not just one. If there is no one single Santa, ergo, there is no Santa. And finally, how do you expect some fat guy to get down a chimney and leave presents when we don't even have chimneys in this part of the country?"

"I don't believe you," I persisted.

"Well, that's up to you," Rebecca chimed in. "But we don't want to eat lunch with someone who believes in fairies, do we Marion?"

Marion said, "No we don't." Then the two of them packed up what was left of their meals and left our table.

Anderson and Kelly looked at one another as if asking with their eyes if they should do the same. Suddenly, I felt I was being snubbed by all my friends. I shoved what was left of the hot dog back in a sandwich bag, threw the apple and thermos into the lunch pail, rolled the potato chip bag closed and slammed the metal lid shut.

I went back into the classroom and fumed.

At home later that afternoon I followed my mother around as she worked in the kitchen. She seemed to appreciate the attention and several times I attempted to broach the subject. But whenever it seemed an appropriate moment to ask, she began another

project. She peeled carrots for a salad and washed the utensils afterwards; she set the table and cleaned up after my brothers in the living room; it was time to do a load of laundry.

Finally I said insistently, “Mom! You gotta talk to me.”

“About what, honey?”

“About Santa Claus.”

She fluffed a pillow and straightened out the bedspread in the master bedroom. She put her hands on her hips and stood up tall and asked, “What about Santa Claus? It’s only October. Santa won’t be here until December and that’s two months away.”

I was not as conversational with adults, even with my mother, as I was with my schoolmates. Sometimes I stuttered. This time I was able to spit it out in one phrase: “The kids at school say Santa isn’t real.”

My mother looked down on me with a pitying expression. “They’re right. He doesn’t exist, Jeremy. You should know that. You’re a big boy now. You know Santa Claus is just a story.”

Her confirmation was my undoing. Tears welled up in my eyes and I began to sob. “You never told me that. I always thought he was real.”

“No, dear, he’s not.”

I went to my room and threw myself on the bed with an anguished cry of pain. Although she followed me in and stroked my head and said soothing words of consolation, I was never able to trust anything she said after that.

I knew she was lying. Santa was real, he was alive and he brought me everything I wished for and I was going to believe that until the day I died which would never happen because, like Peter Pan, I was never going to grow up.

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