

A photograph of Santa Claus sitting on a red throne, flanked by two young children. The child on the left is wearing a blue and white striped turtleneck, and the child on the right is wearing a blue turtleneck. Both children's eyes are obscured by black bars. The background is decorated with white garlands and gold ornaments.

**FOR NOT
WAITING FOR
CHRISTMAS**

DAN KLASS

For Not Waiting For Christmas

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THE PRELUDE & THE BIG SHOW

I must have been about 9 years-old the year we just couldn't wait until Christmas Day. Or rather, the year my *mother* couldn't wait. Kids can never wait.

It was a special year anyway, as my grandparents had flown in to spend the holiday with us, leaving their warm ranch-style in San Bernardino, California to freeze in Rochester, New York with my sister and me.

Everything had proceeded as usual that Christmas Eve. The Partridge Family *A Christmas Card to You* blared from the gigantic speakers in the gigantic wooden stereo cabinet in the living room, a cabinet so large it could easily fill the available floor space of my current home. Lighted bulbs shone from the tree, casting reds and greens and blues on the silver tinsel that had been the cause of much bickering just three weeks before. The fondue (having somehow become a family tradition) had been prepared and devoured with the number of oil burned fingers well within the range of acceptable for a holiday. And, yes, looking back I do question the sanity of four grown and seemingly sane adults allowing my five year-old sister to deep fry chunks of beef in a pot of boiling oil in her pre-flame retardant p.j.s. But, alas, it was the early 70's, and we were trendsetting Americans, so what's a couple of third degree burns among family?

So, how these things work in our family, even now that I have my own family, is like this: we eat dinner while David Cassidy serenades (you haven't had a real Christmas until you've heard the Partridge's rather melancholy take on *Frosty the Snowman*), we clear the table, and then the kids get to open one present. One. Okay, maybe two. But we have to stop at three or there won't be enough on Christmas Day.

Christmas Day was "The Big Show." *The* day of the year for my mother. My mother, especially when we were kids, would start her Christmas lists, her planning and coordinating of gifts, in June, July if it was a particularly hectic summer. Each year, on Christmas morn, the parade of gifts would begin, with all the pageantry and drama, the building of tension and comic relief, of Shakespeare's finest works. Perhaps she'd start with something small, but fun. A silly toy that she noticed you noticed at Sears last March, that makes noise (but not too much) and requires batteries. Then, socks. Socks or underwear, to build anxiety, something you didn't think of as a *real gift* at all. Then, wham, right between the eyes with the double live Osmond Brothers album you saw in her record club catalog but didn't even bother pointing out because it was, after all, a *double*. But she actually got it. The double live Osmond Brothers album!

And so it went.

She'd nestle down, practically under the tree herself, and survey the Everest of wrapped boxes. She'd wrestle with a few packages, making last minute adjustments to the pile until she found her "opener." She knew the contents of each box by its dimensions, no shaking and checking of tags to know whose lap it should land in. She knew every box and its place in her grand scheme. Once the first gift was located, the curtain went up and the show began.

Meanwhile, my father sat, silently nursing his coffee. Black, two sugars. He'd stare into the middle distance, trying to wake up, occasionally offering a throaty word of forced excitement when it was coxed from him by my mother. Christmas morning always started way too early for my father, even though he must have had to get up at that time everyday to get ready for work. There must have been something in his biology (psychology?), as there is for all fathers, that just couldn't get over the fact that we were up that early voluntarily.

Christmas mornings are actually the only time I remember spending any length of time with my father while he was in his pajamas. Usually, in the morning, he was behind closed doors, filling the Master Bathroom with the smells of Barbasol and last Christmas' cologne, only to emerge fully outfitted in his upper-middle management armor of suit and cuff links. He didn't nurse his coffee on those days, but slurped it while suiting up, leading with the empty cup as he blurred in a dash from the bedroom to his company car.

On Christmas, he sat, in whatever bathrobe he'd received two Christmas mornings before, and tried to wake up.

My mother building, building, and building to a crescendo: the big gift. The gift you never dreamed you'd get so never even asked for. The big one that you'd stare at in awe for weeks to come. The big one that would eventually be completely forgotten, having been topped the next year by something even more incredible. The year before the year my grandparents came, it was a record player. My *own* record player. A royal blue plastic stereophonic record player of my very own, for my room, that I could play my Jackson 5 albums on. My pride and joy, the record player that I would listen to, non-stop, until I become a teenager and inherited the huge stereo-server-furniture thing that had been in the living room.

There was extra excitement in the air the year my grandparents came to Rochester for Christmas.

CURLY AND LEO AND THE TWO ILAS

I'd never seen my grandparents out of context. They lived in California, in a small one-story house on a corner. My sister and I would spend weeks at a time there with my parents, and I would spend as much time as possible hiding out in my Grandpa Curly's camper, reading his dirty paperbacks or rummaging through his collection of casino match books. Or, I'd sneak into the garage and climb up on his work bench and try to see "The Toilet." "The Toilet" was, as you can imagine, a toilet. In the garage. It was in a small stall in the corner, and clearly hadn't been in working order for years, decades maybe. It was brown. The whole insides of the stall was brown, from dust and who-knows-what. The rest of the house was immaculate: trees trimmed perfectly, hours spent pulling weeds from the flower beds, modern but tasteful bric-a-brac to offset the souvenir ashtrays from Reno and Vegas. And *The Toilet*.

Oh, and the boy that would pee Scotch. Curly had a full bar in the breezeway that led out to the banana tree where the lawn statue of the Mexican man sat, sleeping, all the time. Pancho Via, I think they called him. You could take his hat off and look inside him. He was full of spiders. He had no head, just a sombrero that rested on his folded arms and legs and feet in sandals, but no head. And full of spiders. But the boy who peed Scotch was on the bar in the breezeway. He looked like a cherub that you'd see as part of an ornate statue in Italy or Venice, all pot-bellied and naked. He was only a couple inches tall, and would stand on top of one of the bottles of Scotch or whatever it was on my Grandfather's bar, and if you wanted a drink, you pressed a button on his back and he'd pee into your highball glass. He may even has peed in perfect jiggers, I have no idea. I didn't drink in those days. I just wanted to see him pee, and get a good look at The Toilet and maybe run some water inside Pancho's hollow shell to flush out all those damned spiders.

When I wasn't reading about randy stewardesses (*Coffee, Tea or Me?*) or sneaking peaks at a dusty commode or throwing old bowling pins around the backyard, my grandparents would play cards with us or Yahtzee something, or Curly would give me a paperback full of racist jokes, which would keep me out of trouble for hours (*New Italian Tires! Dago through snow, Dago through sleet, and when Dago flat, Dago WOP, WOP, WOP...*) At some point, we'd be invited to sit outside and pull weeds with my Grandma Ila, which would only result in fighting. I'd eventually start bugging my mother, whose name is also Ila, for some money, so my sister and I could walk down to the liquor store and buy some Wacky Packages.

These visits to my grandparents house were always long and exciting and boring and educational. Sometimes I'd come home with souvenirs, like the time Curly's friend Ralph thought he was dying so he gave me something to remember him by, a "Polish Mug." It was a coffee cup with the handle on the inside. The damned Polish, they're so stupid...

Curly was a good man. He was a custodian at the local elementary school where my grandmother worked as a lunch lady. I guess that's where they met. He always seemed happy and treated her well, and the only thing I ever saw him get upset about was me snooping around in everything. He called me a "nip nose," which I was. A relentless, master damned nip nose. "Stop yer nib nosing around, Danny, Jesus Christ Almighty!"

He was a hell of a lot better than my real grandfather. Leo. Apparently, Leo had been a real jerk. Leo suffered from a Napoleon complex, and ran the house when he was in charge like a little French dictator, if a French dictate was a tiny Irish man who worked in a rock quarry. He had to control everything. Everything.

On Christmas mornings, he would open all the presents. *All of them.* He would pick up each box, announce who the gift was for and then open it himself. Eventually, the contents of the unwrapped box were handed over to their rightful owner. And then he'd pick up the next box...

Apparently, this is how Christmas went in my mom's house forever, or at least until my grandmother divorced Leo. It must have been those Christmases around the tree with Leo unwrapping my mother's poodle skirts and bobbie socks and my Uncle Dwayne's whatever-the-hell-boys-wanted-for-Christmas-in-the-50s that fanned the fire that would eventually ignite The Big Show.

JANGLES AND THE CREEPY DOLL

One Christmas we were visiting California, and the two Ilas sat and visited with Aunt Mayola. You know how adults can just talk and talk forever about other adults and what all the other kids are doing, and the conversation will eventually veer into them talking about people you've never even heard of. Ugg. I'd about had it, and was getting awfully bored with the adults not entertaining me. Because Aunt Mazzie was there, I had to just sit there in the livingroom, and "visit." I wasn't allowed to see if The Munsters was on, or check out The Toilet or anything. I had to just sit there and stare at my grandmother's tiny tinsel tree.

We'd always had real trees growing up, but my grandparents were either too modern or too lazy for that, and opted for a tinsel tree. Why they couldn't buy a real tree and just put some silver tinsel on it was beyond me. They had a tree that was all tinsel, with no real tree whatsoever. What it did have that ours didn't, however, was a motorized spot light. A thousand watt bulb sat on a small stand on the floor beside the tree, and in front of the bulb was a disc that would slowly rotate, passing different colors of plastic gel in front of the light. The colored light would shine on the tinsel tree, turning it red and green and blue and red and green and blue. A wonderful effect, if somewhat lost on me in the bright sunlight of 2pm.

I could only take it for so long. Three adults sitting around talking. No television allowed. My grandfather wasn't around to play poker with or ask me to

read aloud from one of my ethic joke books. His stereo system, while adequately loud to fill the entire house, seemed to only play Les Baxter. The only interesting thing, really, was the fire hazard on the floor beside the tree.

Now, just when you think, as a child, you are being ignored, that is exactly when you're being watched, trust me.

"Danny?"

I looked at my grandmother suspiciously.

"Yeah?"

"You like that light, honey?"

"Guess so."

"Don't touch the bulb, honey, or it'll burn you good."

That was about the stupidest thing someone could have said. "Don't touch the bulb." Why were they doing this to me? I actually hadn't thought of touching the bulb. I wanted to grab the motorized disc with the gels in it. I wanted to see if, but grabbing the disc, the motor would flip itself over. My grandmother was always bringing home old science books from the school where she was a lunch lady, and was always proud that I took such an interest in physics. I was sure that some physical property would be called into play if I grabbed that stupid disc and stopped it spinning. Surely that stupid motor would keep trying to spin, and would flip that whole stupid thing onto its back. Or at least it would start grinding away on the inside, fighting my iron grip, or at least topple over. That's what I'd been thinking. At least until she mentioned the bulb. Why, was it really *that* hot? Wow. That hot and in the *living room*? On the *carpeting*?

Clearly my grandmother could read my mind. Maybe it was her side of the family that I got my curiosity/boredom aversion from, because she seemed to know the gears were turning in my head faster than the Christmas gel wheel.

"Danny, do you know about the Christmas Tree Elf?"

"What?"

"The Christmas Tree Elf? Who's in charge of that light?"

"Go on."

“One of Santa’s elves, I can’t remember his name, I think it’s Jangles, is in charge of that light. He’s the only one who is supposed to turn it on or turn it off.”

“Oh.” I saw what was happening. She didn’t want me to turn off the light. I got it. I was kind of hoping that if I’d gotten a grip on the gel wheel and flipped that stupid motor over, I’d get sent out of the room. Then I could go see if *Truth or Consequences* was on in my grandpa’s den where my sister and I would sleep. I’d settle for Jack Lalane at this point, but not another story about Aunt Gerline or Aunt Pauline. If they’d explain to me again why Uncle Earl, the former prize fighter, had once knocked out a horse like Lee Marvin in *Paint Yer Wagon*, then I’d maybe be interested. But I could never remember which one was Gerline and which one was Pauline. I knew my grandma Ila and Aunt Mayola and Aunt Eula, so I thought I was ahead of the game.

“Well, if you go out of the room, and we call Jangles, I bet he’d come and turn off the light, if we asked him.”

“What? Really?” This sounded interesting.

“Let’s try it. You go into your mother’s room, and wait there. Be very quiet. And we’ll call Jangles. I bet he’ll come and turn off that light.”

I had no idea my grandma had dealings with elves. Now, why Santa would spare an elf this time of year, so close to the big day, to manage the lighting in my grandparents’ San Bernardino ranch-style was beyond me, but I was in no position to argue. She explained that the elves never show themselves to children, so I needed to go into my mother’s room and shut the door. They’d call Jangles and when he’d turned the light off, they’d call me back in.

Sounded legit enough. And, it was either go into the other room and wait for an elf or sit, bored out of my nib-nose little mind, in the living room, *not* playing with that light.

I went into the room, my mother’s old bedroom, and shut the door.

I’d forgotten that was where we’d put the creepy doll.

My mother had an old doll that scared the living shit out of my sister and me. The first time I’d seen it, it was standing there, waiting for us, in my grandpa’s den. Curly’s den was dark and made of wood and bowling trophies and souvenirs. And it housed one of the hippest things I’d ever seen: a black globe. That was cool, man. The oceans, instead of being colored a predictable blue or green or some

combination of blues and greens to indicate the topography of the ocean floor, the oceans were *black*. That was cool. That was a cool globe. If Sinatra had a globe, he would have *that globe*.

Curly's den was arguably my favorite room in the world. Except on the day that I ran in there upon arriving for a visit to find the creepy doll staring at me.

The creepy doll was pale and overdressed. She was realistically rendered, but stared with dead eyes into infinite space. I'm sure when my mother was young, this doll was a coveted item of extreme value. She probably had been given a lovely name like Sally or Debbie or Elizabeth. She was probably just the sort of doll that a little girl would ask for for Christmas whenever it was our mother was young. A little girl would wish and wish and wish, and eventually Christmas would come and the little girl's father would open a box and remove the doll and hand the doll to the little girl, and the little girl would love the doll and never forgive her father.

She was not the sort of doll my sister and I were used to. She didn't have long, tanned legs and a bikini, her hair didn't grow, and she certainly didn't have a Saturday morning cartoon. She was creepy and she made me cry. And, when she was moved from Curly's den, in hopes that we kids would eventually stop crying and be able to sleep in there, she was placed in my mother's old room, where I was now expected to stand quietly and wait for an miniature member of the Electrician's Union.

The doll had been waiting for me. She was standing just off the corner of the room, across from the door, blocking the sliding door to the closet. That was why I'd been so bored in the living room; I couldn't get to the few toys in the house. They were all kept in that closet, and the doll was standing guard.

She stared at me, defying me, daring me to come closer to the closet. The joke was on her, I was in the middle of some sort of pointless transaction with an elf. I didn't care. Elves were fun and lively and had a personal connection with The Big Red-Suited Man. All the doll had was Satan's stare and a closet full of aging tops and a handful of marbles. Maybe some jacks. Maybe. But that was it. If I could just stay in the room and not freak out and not try to look at the elf, Santa's little minion would turn off the light. Not only would I get indirect evidence of the whole Christmas machine in action, but the light would be off, which would surely reduce the risk of someone mistreating it and burning the carpet.

She stared.

I breathed. Looked away. Tried to count to one hundred. At seven, I looked back at the creepy dog. Still staring. Still creepy. An hour went by, maybe two, or a minute or two, I wasn't sure. Staring. Creepy.

"Come on back, Danny!"

The two Ilas and Aunt Mayola sat there, grinning, waving me in.

The light was off. Holy crap. I was stunned.

"He was just here! I'm pretty sure it was Jangles, Danny." My grandma was beside herself. "He came right down the chimney, quick as a wink, I swear. Slicker than poop through a goose he switched that light right off and then he high tailed it right back up that chimney!"

"No way..."

"Sure did."

Wow. This was amazing. An elf came right into Ila and Curly's living room in broad daylight on December 18th just to adjust a light switch! Unbelievable! Now, even then I couldn't figure out why I had to be the only one who couldn't see him. Christmas is for *children*, that's what the adults are always talking about, and *I* was a children, so why the hell did they get to see Jangles come down the chimney and play with the light and not me? And, really, why the hell was Jangles so worried about that light, anyway? And if he was going to come and turn off the stupid light, why couldn't he have dropped off one of my presents or at least a candy cane or something. Had Leo messed this whole routine up years ago with all his control freak bullying with the unwrapping of the gifts? Could the house have been put on some sort of permanent Naughty List? Was the elf coming down to switch off the light because, like me, he didn't completely understand why the stupid light had to be on at two in the afternoon anyway, especially if I wasn't allowed to play around with it and all the adults were doing was drinking soda and talking about Aunt Pauline or Aunt Gerline or whoever. Maybe it was Aunt Eula. My grandmother had too many sisters.

"I bet he'd come and turn it back on. If we called him and you hid."

"I bet he would! Let's find out! Go in the other room, and wait. We'll call you when he's been here. But remember, we're a long way from the North Pole, so it could be a while." My mother was getting a bit too enthusiastic.

I waited patiently in her old room. Quietly. You want to be careful not to provoke an elf. I knew this was probably a low-level worker elf, but I could never assume I knew who his friends were, and he *did* live and work on the main campus of Santa Central. I would be patient and cooperative, and see if we could get him back.

He came. When I was called back in to the living room, the light was back on. Mayola and the Ilas beamed with pride, having coaxed the little guy down the chimney once again.

“Again!”

Being a young, bored man-child, I wanted to see how long we could keep this going.

With each trip, the elf took longer and longer to return to the house to turn the light on or off, whichever it wasn't. And each time the ladies called me back into the room, it was with less and less enthusiasm.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, go back in there, Danny...”

I stood in there, just inside the door, with my back to the creepy doll for what felt like an hour. Eventually, I took the little throw blanket off the foot of the bed and threw it over the doll's head, ready to bash it's head in with a Lincoln Log I'd found under the bed if it attacked.

Eventually I snuck out of my mom's old room and into Curly's den and turned on the TV and watched *I Love Lucy* and nobody even noticed.

FOR NOT WAITING FOR CHRISTMAS DAY

The point was, I'd never seen my grandparents out of context. And I had certainly never seen them in my house in Rochester, especially not at Christmas. The thought of seeing Grandma and Curly in the snow was just, well, unfathomable. They were Southern Californians. Where they live was always sunny and smoggy and warm. I could really only picture them in their house, or camping in the Sierras (they took me fishing there once, in Curly's camper), and maybe in Vegas. But not on Crossridge Road and not in the winter. I'd never seen my Grandfather, any of my grandfathers for that matter, in anything heavier than a cardigan (Curly would sometimes wear a cardigan with pin-legged black slacks. He dressed like I imagined Sammy Davis Jr. would dress, if he was a very caucasian janitor with a bald spot).

But, they came. To Rochester. My mother was so excited, I thought she was going to split. And, when we'd finished our fondue, she said about the last thing I ever expected to hear in my entire life:

“What if we see if we can get Santa to come early this year.”

I stared at her like she was insane. Santa doesn't come early. Santa comes when he comes. When he's in town. Santa comes in the middle of the night, when everyone is dreaming of sugar plums, nestled all snug in their beds. Besides, it was already Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve after fondue dinner. If Santa were to come early, when the heck would he come? Immediately?

“Whadda you mean *early*?”

“I don't know, what if Santa came *tonight*. *Before* you go to bed?”

Neither my sister nor I said a word. We liked what we were hearing and didn't want to say anything that might derail our mother's train of thought. It was a good train, and we liked where it was headed.

“Maybe we could contact Santa and see if he could drop off your gifts early this year. Since Grandma and Grandpa are here. I bet he would.”

Nobody in the room seemed to be questioning the logic of any of this. We were going to ask Santa, who at that moment was most likely busy unloading gifts in China or Russia or where ever the heck it was midnight when it was after dinner time in New York, to drop what he was doing and change his entire route to swing by Rochester because we were feeling excited to have relatives over?

“Okay!”

What the hell were we going to say, we were kids. Mom seemed to know what she was talking about and was completely confident that she could pull it off. How, exactly, I had no idea. She was just some random mother, and even though my dad had a suit-and-tie job at a big company that made cameras and photocopiers, I didn't assume he had any special pull at the North Pole. My grandparents worked for the public school system, so how the hell were they supposed to...

Jangles.

It was then that I remembered that my grandmother knew Jangles. Sure, they probably didn't see much of each other, he probably snuck in and out to manage the tree light in the wee hours of the night, but they were at least acquainted. Hopefully we hadn't strained the relationship, having him turn the light on and off that day for my amusement. If I'd known this sort of “early presents” thing was possible, I would never had used up potential elf points on that stupid light.

The next thing I knew, we were being loaded into my father's brown Pontiac. He and Curly were to drive my sister and me around the neighborhood, looking at the Christmas lights, while the ladies stayed back at the house, to work things out with Santa Claus.

Our neighborhood was not that big, but it felt like we drove and drove and drove, for what seemed like forever. Back in those days, Christmas decorations, in Rochester at least, consisted only of lights. Those big, outdoor lights, that were the norm in the 1970s. Nobody back then had inflatable Santas or penguins or snow globes. Maybe it was the climate, maybe nobody wanted to put anything of value in their yard, with electronic fans and lights and all that, just to have it get snowed on all season. So, it was just lights. Red, green, blue, orange. That was it, house after house. My grandfather, back in California, would have lights too, but he also had an entire life-sized Santa, with sleigh, and eight reindeer that he would mount to

the roof every year. They were huge and wooden and painted in the style of an old story book, the kind of story book you'd see everywhere in the pre-Disney days, the thin cardboard ones with the silver foil on the binding. If memory serves, he could even mount them in a way that would make it look like the reindeer were taking off again, having happily delivered their load of toys and preparing to jet off to the next stop. They were gleeful, mid-takeoff, a moment caught in plywood.

Our neighborhood couldn't handle wooden Santa kitsch. It was all two story mid-60's colonials in neat rows with under landscaped backyards meant for football and hibachis two months a year. And tasteful lights and no reindeer.

I was really getting a nice, vivid image of Curly's decorations going in my head when we pulled back into the driveway. I rushed into the house, nearly knocking my sister over in my haste to see if the Jangles connection had paid off.

"Holy Christ..."

Jackpot.

I knew I'd been extra good that year. At least I tried. And that had been the year of my sister's operation to fix her lazy eye. She was a very cute kid, but one of her eyes, for whatever reason, was a nonconformist. She'd had an operation in mid-October and had spent a lot of time since wearing some sort of 3-D glasses and getting special treatment. Sometimes she had to wear an eye patch, to strengthen one eye, I presumed. Either that, or my parents were just sick of seeing the one that wandered and wanted to cover it up every so often to catch a break. That Halloween, she wasn't allowed to go trick or treating, even when I had the idea that she could go as a pirate. Nobody thought that was funny. So, she stayed home and I went trick or treating without her, with strict orders to ask everyone for extra candy for my "little sister who's been in the hospital." Unbelievable. Who was going to buy that story? "Oh, my little sister is too sick to trick or treat, so, here, fill 'er up!" It sounded like pure grade A bull. But, they believed me. Even though everyone was always cautioning you to not take candy from strangers, that sometimes on Halloween you'd get an apple with a razor blade, or the hippies would shoot LSD into the softer candy bars, it seemed like the people on the streets around our house were incredibly nice and sweetly generous. Or, I had finally perfected my sincere face.

The trick or treating must have scored me some serious fourth-quarter points with the Big Man From the North, because the Christmas tree was teetering on its stand, lifted off the floor by the overflow of gift boxes. It looked like the contents of the Sears store at Eastview Mall had been shoved into our sunken living room, and was about to thrust our still-fresh Douglas Fir out the window and into the back

yard. All the Christmas lights and decorations were fired up, spinning and flashing and tinkling away. The wind-up Saint Nick at the bottom of the stars played a music box “Santa Claus is Coming to Town” while the stereo cabinets poured the voice of Johnny Mathis out over the entire down stairs, bathing us in smooth, yuletide vibrato. The Ila, mother and giddy daughter, were beside themselves, and each other, and they stepped over each other to explain what had happened.

“We did it, we did it! We called Santa and he came, he came early, look at all the presents, you two!”

We *were* looking. It was incredible. I wanted to swan dive into the piles like I’d seen Tarzan dive off a cliff into the snake infested river, and wrestle our bounty into submission. I barely spent an instant questioning the coordination it must have taken, the rescheduling and rerouting, the sheer magic it must have taken for Santa to make this magnificent pit-stop in the middle of Christmas Eve. I was probably busy making his way through the United Kingdom at that hour, putting gifts into their shoes or clogs or whatever the heck strange stuff the Europeans had him do. He had to drop all that Father Christmas jazz and high tail it over to America, early, because Ila and Cury were in Rochester. Amazing. Just amazing.

The only explanation was magic. It must take magic to pull something like that off. Magic and hard work and a belief that on Christmas anything is possible if you need to make someone happy.

THE EARLY SHOW

Before we knew it the curtain had gone up and the big show had begun.

My mother was in rare form that year, building the tension and suspense, breaking the tension with a little comedy and some teasing of my father. My father, who was awake and fully dress and enjoying an after dinner drink while unwrapping cologne and joking with Curly. Gift after gift, barely a sock or undershirt in sight. Record albums, electronics kits, red and blue plastic robots that would punch each other in the jaw, Arctic weather G.I. Joe, clothes just like The Jackson 5 would wear...

Until...

The Big Gift of 1972: The Giant. Yellow. Snowmobile.

It wasn't *really* a snowmobile. It was a sled. A huge yellow sled made of metal and plastic and handlebars that looked just like a snowmobile. Well, a frame in the shape of a snowmobile with a yellow plastic face-plate on the front and what looked like long metal skis on the bottom. Still, it was *magnificent*.

This was not our first winter in snowy Upstate New York, so my sister and I were semi-professional sledders. Ranked in our neighborhood. Not champions, but rookies to watch. My sister and I would sled down a hill between two houses adjacent to ours with the three sisters that lived next door. We'd take turns going down on a blue flying saucer of one of those long thick plastic sheet-things we all had back then, where you had to lay on it and slide down while fighting its need to roll back up. Our neighbors had those sleds too, but they also had a Flexible Flyer, the official sled of American easterners since probably the Revolutionary War. A Flexible Flyer was a completely inflexible metal frame with wooden slats on top and hinges to steer. They looked like they had been designed by an Amish blacksmith. Under the proper conditions, they went faster than anything on the hill, and if one

ran you over, you were instantly an amputee. The Flexible Flyer ruled the hill. Until this Christmas. Our days of saucers and plastic sheets were over, and if anyone got their leg cut off this winter, it would be by our new Yellow Jet.

THE YELLOW JET JETS

The next morning, Christmas morning, felt like a Sunday. Any Sunday. Except that my grandparents were there. My mother made Pillsbury Cinnamon Swirl Breakfast Sugar Swirls or whatever they were called, and just went about her day, chatting and laughing with my grandmother. It was Christmas morning, and my father was not sitting, dazed, on the living room sofa in his robe and pajamas, waiting for the caffeine to pull him back to the surface. He was in bed. Sleeping. On Christmas morning.

No gifts to open. They'd all been opened. The boxes had been identified, handed out and unwrapped, gifts admired and thanked for, and the wrapping paper had been thrown out. The evidence of the big show was all there, but the show had closed for the season. The gifts, now naked, were all piled in neat stacks, by recipient, and spaced around the room so as not to create confusion. My sister was busy playing with a doll whose hair was supposed to grow if you pulled on it (is that really growing, or is that just pulling out? Growing shouldn't require so much force being applied by a 5 year old girl). I tried to get her to ditch the hair pulling and play Rock 'em Sock 'em with me, but mom over heard our negotiations and nipped them in the bud.

“No robot fights. Dad's still sleeping.”

I know. Rub it in. I offered to take the main event down to the basement, but my sister didn't want to go, so I just sat staring at the snowmobile.

“Can we take the snow...”

“Not until Dad gets up and helps you take it out doors.”

“What about Grand...”

“He’s sleeping too.”

This was going to be the longest couple of hours of my life. Part of the problem was that there was too much of a space buffer between my bedroom and my parents. Both rooms were upstairs, separated by the top landing of the stairway and the bathroom my sister and I used and then a couple more stairs. No amount of realistically innocent playing sound from my bedroom would ever wake my dad in the Master Suite. I could go in my room and loudly unpack my new G.I. Joe or play my new Jackson 5 “Going Back to Indiana” record, but my mother would hear the racket from the kitchen below before it would rouse Big Dan. I could reverse the line of attack, and try to be loud in the living room directly below my parents bed, but that’d get shut down pronto by my mother a mere TV room away.

Surviving this most shitty of Christmas mornings was going to take something I just wasn’t prepared to muster: patience.

Eventually, somehow my Dad was able to jockey the Yellow Jet out of the living room, through the house and out to the back yard with out the help of magical elves. A freshly awakened Curly, but no elves. My dad was barely awake, but I think my sitting in front of the ice cold fireplace, staring into space, pouting, had worked it’s magic on my mother, and she on him. And, Curly was a good guy who would help you do anything, as long as you stayed away from the toilet in his garage.

The plan was to test out The Yellow Jet before the Spright girls from next door came out. I wanted my sister and me to get that baby running and see just how fast it was before we challenged everyone to a race and kicked their stupid asses. Jane Spright was always better than me in football and baseball and sledding and everything, but not anymore. The Yellow Jet was gonna be so damned fast my sister and I would be legends. Legends!

For moral support I brought my Arctic G.I. Joe. He was all in white camouflage snow gear. My sister and I were head to toe in oversized goose down and rubber boots and mittens. I didn’t care. The usual complaining about getting over dressed was skipped. I had my eye on the prize.

Pulling the Yellow Jet through our back yard to the sled hill, the beast looked like it had already hit supersonic speeds. Holy cow, I wonder exactly how fast this thing would go? Could we break the sound barrier? Oh, please. Please, let a sonic boom rock Jane Spright out of your butt, just once.

We positioned the rocket sled at the top of the hill, pointing perfectly between the two houses at the bottom. Since it was Christmas day, there would be no traffic

on the street, so the plan was to zoom between the houses, hit a snow bank, jump the street beyond and then keep going. If we made it all the way to Park Road, I'd scream "JUMP!" and we'd bail out before we hit the tree in front of the Melville's house.

"Should I go back and get my football helmet? Just in case?"

"Probably."

"Should we take just one run first, before we go back for the helmet?"

"Probably"

My sister and I looked at each other sternly, like astronauts must before a countdown.

"You know how to get back to the house, right? If I lose consciousness or something? From the G forces?"

"I think so."

I bravely took my seat in the front, at the handle bars, my sister locking her fists around the sides of my coat. This was it. Nothing was going to be the same.

"Ready?"

I could feel my sister nod behind me as she sniffed snot back up into her nose. I pushed off, gently, so as not to take off too fast or too recklessly.

Nothing.

I pushed off again, with more conviction.

Nothing.

Digging in my boots, leaning into the handle bars, leaning out over the yellow hood.

Nothing.

What the hell? The bright yellow skis of our supposed jet ski had dug into the relatively fresh snow and stuck there, making it impossible to move forward. I grabbed the sled and pulled it up, then repositioned it in a new spot. It dug in.

“Shit!”

“Danny!”

I dragged the bulking frame over about ten feet or so, to where we kids had matted the snow down more the day before. This would work. We sat down, only hopeful until we did, because our weight pushed the thin skis down into the snow again. We both pushed, coordinated like a couple of elementary school crew team members, pushing and pushing. It barely moved.

It became very clear very quickly that the only way this stupid yellow piece of crap was going to slide down that hill was if the hill was covered in a sheet of solid ice. And if the hill was covered in a sheet of solid ice, we could sled down on my mother’s coffee table if we wanted to. I would probably offer us a better ride than the useless hunk before us. What had looked like a gleaming rocket sled just moments before now looked like a haphazard collection of random pipes and pieces of pointy rain gutters.

I was so pissed, I grabbed up my Arctic G.I. Joe from where he was straddling the handle bars, and threw him at the plastic hood of the sled. He bounced off and hit me square in the forehead, right on the scar I got when I fell on the handle of my old red wagon. Just great.

I dragged the supposed sled back to our house, hoping, praying with every step that the Spright sisters wouldn’t see us through their patio doors, doing the walk of shame with our yellow piece of crap. This sled was supposed to rocket me to neighborhood celebrity status. Luckily nobody had been around for our first launch, or I would definitely have risen in the consciousness of the neighborhood. And then we would have had to move.

We dumped the sled against the snow drift behind the garage and headed in. My mother and grandmother were still yacking away, and the men were conversing in that way adult men do, where they take turns saying a word or two every five minutes.

If this had been a real Christmas morning, we’d all still be in our pajamas. We’d still be sitting around the Christmas tree. My dad wouldn’t be saying a word, he’d just grunt whenever my mother made him open something. And my sister and I would still be knee deep in unopened presents. Instead, my parents and grandparents were sitting around, just hanging out, passing the time together. What they were laughing about, I had no idea. They must have gotten a real kick

out of talking about all our relatives and friends and fishing and bowling and my cousins.

Jesus Christ. This was the worst. I pout-stomped into the living room and dug the Partridge Family album out of the rack and put it on the massive turntable. Side one. I sat and watched the record player go through its mechanized routine, a routine that always cheered me up because it meant music was a mere ten seconds away. Table spins, arm lifts, player drops record, record gets up to speed, arms moves over and semi-gracefully drops needle onto vinyl. The familiar pop and hiss of the needle finding purchase in the grooves of the first track. The song started. David Cassidy sang, wishes of peace and love to us and our friends and family, reminding me to be happy with everything, everyday, to see the joy and love that surrounds me, even when my new awesome sled is a piece of shit. A remarkably sweet and snowy wishing of well from a guy who lives in California in a painted school bus.

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DAN KLASS is a writer, actor and pioneering podcaster living in Los Angeles.

If you enjoyed this story, please check out his podcast, **THE BITTEREST PILL**, at <http://www.thebitterestpill.com>

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