

# A Christmas Eve Journey

December 24, 2013 at 8:48am

*Author's note: This story first appeared in The Press on 12/21/05 when this "daddy's girl" was newly grieving the loss of mine. I know of so many people this year facing their first Christmas without a parent or loved one. It's my wish for them and all Main Street readers that the spirit of Christmas surround you with love and light and hope.*

The group of first graders were giggly with delight when Santa came into the classroom, bellowing "Ho! Ho! Ho!" They gathered around, chattering and scrambling to sit on his lap, eager to tell him everything on their list. All but one little boy, Michael, who sat off to the side observing. He listened and watched and at one point sidled up next to me. With eyes big he leaned close and quietly asked, "Is that the real Santa Claus?" I looked right at him with equally wide eyes and answered honestly and without hesitation, "He's the only Santa I've known for my whole entire life."

Satisfied, Michael joined his classmates for treats and a visit with jolly old St. Nick.

That was nearly twenty years ago and one of many adventures I shared with Santa. Growing up, our house was always the most brightly lit, my father climbing the 40-foot-tall tree in our front yard to string the lights and affix a 6-foot-tall star on top that could be seen for blocks around. He loved Christmas and he still loved being Santa after all of us kids were grown. He even bought his very own Santa suit, which he kept with the beard and hat and wig in its own special suitcase. He transformed into Santa Claus when donning the suit at shopping malls, church and community Christmas parties and for several years on Christmas Eve when I'd surprise the winner of the newspaper's Letters to Santa contest with a personal visit.

My father was Santa Claus, the only Santa I knew for my whole entire life. This year would be my first Christmas without him and I couldn't bear the thought. Every song and jingle bell and twinkling Christmas light broke my heart a little bit. It had been only two months since he'd passed away and I asked my childrens' and grandchildrens' understanding that I just wanted to spend the holiday without family or fanfare. I urged them to stay at home... making and celebrating new traditions. My husband and I would spend a quiet Christmas at a lodge in Montana, away from everything familiar and sad.

It was odd to be going off by ourselves but we settled in early the day before Christmas. We went into the restaurant just after dark for Christmas Eve dinner. Waiting to be seated, I noticed a jar on the hostess desk with a handwritten sign asking for donations for a woman with four children. She'd been widowed a few months before when her husband was killed in a logging accident.

We sat down to dinner in front of the fireplace but I could not get the woman and her children out of my mind. I asked our waitress for details, she knew few, just that a regular customer had

brought the jar in weeks ago. During dinner I kept bringing the conversation back to the woman and how she should have had that money before Christmas to buy gifts for the children. After dinner I asked the restaurant manager if he knew the woman and he said he just knew that she lived 30 miles away in Thompson Falls. My husband knew what was coming when I asked if we could take the jar to her that night. He was up for a Christmas Eve road trip so after looking up her address in the phone book, we called to make sure the family would be home. A young man answered and said yes, they were there. The restaurant manager gladly handed us the jar full of money.

We went into the little store at the hot springs and found a small gift bag among the souvenirs and soda pop. Back in our room, we put the money in the gift bag and emptied our pockets to fill it all the way up. Off we went down a dark and unfamiliar Montana back road on Christmas Eve to find this widow and her children. I realized I was smiling, something I hadn't done in a while, which also made my husband smile.

When we finally arrived in Thompson Falls it was after 9 p.m. The modest house had a stroller and a bicycle on the front porch... a Christmas tree glowing through the front window. We parked in the driveway and I stepped out into the cold with the gift bag. I realized as I knocked at the door I hadn't a clue what to say to this stranger. When she answered the door I was momentarily struck by how young she was, the age of our oldest daughters. I could hear children playing in the other room as I asked if she was Beth and she nodded.

"You don't know me but I believe I was sent by Santa and your husband to make sure you know how much they want you to have a Merry Christmas," I said.

I handed her the bag and asked her to tell her children how much their daddy loved them. She reached out and hugged me tight. I turned to walk back to the car, feeling my own father smiling down from that starry Christmas sky. I will always believe that my lifelong Santa showed me the way out of grief and sadness by sending me on a Christmas Eve journey of giving in that remote Montana town.

May the child in your heart live forever, love always lighting your way. Believe.