

“Whacking Santa Claus- A Christmas Story”

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The entire block emanated the spirit of a Norman Rockwell painting- if you listened closely, you could hear Christmas carols even though no one was actually singing.

Fresh snow was falling in that steady, non-threatening way that brings Frank Capra to mind, covering everything in a serene fluffy whiteness. Not a creature was stirring- or so they say.

Each identical tract home on Maple street had an SUV in the driveway, obnoxiously mocking the snow with their sheer mass and bad gas mileage.

In the house at 42 Maple was a man named Bobby Nattoli. He was on the couch, sleeping off the minor drunk he'd put on after his three little girls went to bed.

Bobby loved Christmas as much as his children did, maybe more. His house was lit up inside and out with thousands of lights, a giant tree stood in the living room, already buried in presents. There was a giant inflatable Homer Simpson on the lawn and a blow up Santa straddling the chimney on the roof. The small electricity regulator on the side of the house spun merrily around, making someone, somewhere, a very happy Christmas gift.

Except there was one thing out of place. The Santa was no longer straddling the chimney. Instead he was folded neatly in a heap. Oh, and there was also a sleigh with several bored reindeer standing on the roof.

Inside the house a noise in the kitchen brought Bobby wearily back to consciousness. The television set was still on, the day's normal programming over. George Foreman was on instead, hocking grills.

In a rush, Bobby fumbled around in a futile attempt to find the remote so he could turn down the volume on the TV. He rose blearily from the couch and made a swerving beeline to the box on top shelf of the bookcase where he kept the antique pistol known in his family as “Pappy's gun.”

Bobby yanked the top off of the box, grabbed the gun, and swung himself around in the direction of the kitchen. His head was throbbing and his glasses were still sitting on the floor- but he clearly heard another sound coming from the kitchen- a ball of fear started to roil around in his gut.

Because his three daughters spent most of their time living with their mother, the thought that one of the girls could be in the kitchen didn't immediately occur to Bobby. When it did, he muttered, “That better not be you Abigail.” But not loud enough that anyone could hear. His voice literally died as he said the words, because he suddenly caught sight of the source of the noise.

It wasn't one of his daughters- unless they'd gained a few hundred pounds and grew two feet since bedtime.

“Hey you, don't move!” Bobby yelled, trying to keep the quaver of fear he was feeling from leaking out. He lifted the gun to chest height, the barrel shook.

Bobby startled the man in the kitchen who had been munching on a plate of cookies left on the kitchen counter with the sprawl of Ashlyn's handwriting on a note that read, "For Santa." With the 'F' written backwards.

The intruder spun his jolly old self around to face the frightened homeowner but before he could get out a word there was a crack and a flash from Pappy's gun that surprised Bobby so badly he let out an involuntary yelp. He had no idea the gun was even loaded- he hadn't even taken it out of its hiding place in a year or two.

The flash of light illuminated the shocked face of Santa Claus just for a millisecond. In the immediate silence after the gunshot, the thump of Santa's body hitting the floor was gut wrenchingly loud.

Bobby rushed to the wall and flicked on the light, plainly revealing what he'd just done.

"Oh my god, I whacked Santa." Bobby said to himself, looking down at the large red lump of man now bleeding on his kitchen floor.

For a long moment he just stood where he was, frozen.

In that moment Bobby's subconscious mind was feverishly trying to process what he was seeing. The dead person laying on his floor was a picture perfect image of Santa Claus, he had the beard, the red nose, the stomach that looked like a bowl full of jelly. The sack he was carrying was laying on the floor, some gifts spilled out. Bobby's eyes focused on one of the packages labels, "To Gary" it said.

Bobby didn't know any Garys- whoever this man was, he wasn't stealing anything.

"Shit. I really whacked Santa." Bobby repeated, the reality still not particularly set in. However, the confused guilt had already set up residence in his heart.

Santa didn't exist. Santa was parents or loved ones. There was no man that flew around the world in a single night and delivered presents to all the boys and girls- that was a myth. A nice myth, but just that.

Except the myth was dead on the floor in front of him.

From somewhere upstairs came the frightened voice of his oldest daughter Abigail, who was ten. "Daddy, what's going on?" She asked, sounding scared.

The panic of the moment almost overwhelmed poor Bobby. Not only had he just shot the most beloved figure in the entire lexicon of childhood characters, his daughter was going to be downstairs any moment to witness what he'd done, no doubt with her younger twin sisters in tow. He might as well have cooked the Easter Bunny in a stew or shot Barney the Dinosaur with a rocket launcher.

"It's okay sweetie. Go back to bed, Dad just knocked something over." He yelled, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Is it Santa Daddy? I thought I heard hooves on the roof a minute ago."

"Santa hasn't been here yet sweetie." He lied.

"Try not to knock anything else over okay Dad? I think you woke Ally and Ashlyn up too."

"Tell them I said it was okay and to go back to bed. Goodnight sweetheart, I love you."

"Love you too Dad. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas Doodlebug."

Bobby looked down at Santa's corpse and wanted to cry.

Then he thought about all of the kids all over the world that weren't going to get toys because he had to have that third glass of wine in a pre-Christmas pity party over the sad state of his life. Having the kids was wonderful, but it brought home in a stark way how much they were missing from his life. The truth was, he was as angry at himself for forgetting his children were in his house as he was that he'd just smoked Santa.

The puddle of blood was spreading and the practical need to move the body suddenly imposed itself. The thought that he would call the police never even entered the picture. Bobby knew it was an accident, but the fact was- he'd shot Santa- and he would without a doubt get the chair.

Fighting the urge to throw up, Bob reluctantly began to pat Santa down, looking for his wallet. He wondered madly if Santa even carried a wallet.

It turned out Santa didn't carry a wallet. But he did have a couple of very strange items that went a long way towards making Bobby believe the imaginary person in front of him was really a real imaginary person after all.

Underneath his coat Santa was wearing a belt with several brightly colored buttons. Unlike Batman's utility belt, Santa's didn't have any handy labels to identify their purpose. All he had was colors- white, green, red, and yellow.

On Santa's wrist was a stopwatch that was actively counting backwards from what Bobby had no doubt was a 24 hour time cycle. It read 18:36:23. The watch too had four brightly colored buttons, this time orange, purple, silver, and black. Finally, and most unbelievably of all, Bobby found Santa's cell phone.

He flipped it open and called up the phone book. It was full of names like Blinkers and Bonky. He flipped it shut again. Bobby's mind jumped to what Abigail said about the sounds on the roof.

"Oh Jesus Christ." Bobby said.

He ran to the front door and then slid to a stop, gently opening the front door so he wouldn't draw the girls back out of their room. In bare feet, his teeth clenching, he ran out into the snow. He was about half way across the lawn when the reindeer and the sleigh became visible on the roof.

"Oh Jesus Christ." Bobby said.

He ran back into his house. Bobby's feet felt like they were already frostbitten even though he knew he'd only been outside for 10 seconds. Still, once he'd clicked the door shut again, he stood in the foyer and rubbed warmth back into his feet before walking back to Santa.

The puddle of blood was a bit bigger now.

And there were reindeer on the roof. No matter how many times that particular thought slid across his mind he couldn't quite accept it. But still, it was there, and so were they.

The obvious thing seemed to be to start experimenting with the utility belt. Bobby pushed the white button. Nothing happened. Frustrated, Bobby pushed Santa, not very hard, but he still slid across the kitchen floor like an air hockey puck, ricocheting off of a cabinet and sliding right back to him.

Cocking over his head in curiosity, Bobby tried to lift Santa's shoulder with one hand and was amazed when he lifted the rotund man with almost no effort. Santa's body sagged in the air in a morbid fashion, causing Bobby to quickly set him back down. He

hit the white button again and felt the heaviness of Santa's body return when it settled on his foot.

With a grunt, Bobby pulled it free.

Bobby hit the green button. It had no discernable effect. Santa was still heavy. He pushed it again. Still nothing.

He hit the yellow button. Santa suddenly became a cardboard cutout. The normally three dimensional man had somehow become as thin as a piece of paper. He was still heavy though. Bobby realized that 2-D Santa wasn't bleeding.

A plan began to form in Bobby's brain. It was crazy, but there wasn't anything about what was happening that would qualify as sane- there was an imaginary person dead on his floor- currently in a 2 dimensional form.

He pushed the button to make Santa 3 dimensional again, then pressed the button to make him weightless. Once he was floating Bobby hit the yellow button again and Santa became a weightless post card that was no longer bleeding on the kitchen floor.

After a brief debate with himself, Bobby decided he would put Santa into the hall closet, the door had a lock on it- it was the kind a five year old could pick with a butter knife if they wanted to, but Bobby was willing to take the risk. His mind kept going back to the stopwatch on Santa's wrist. Each second that went by made what was going to happen next all the more daunting.

Bobby was going to do Santa's route.

He figured it was the least he could do considering the fact he'd shot the guy. If he did the route then it would be a year before anyone even realized Santa was gone. It wasn't like Santa was ever sighted having drinks in the Bahamas on the beach in July or writing stories for the New Yorker.

Bobby took a few rags from the kitchen drawer and wet them, sopping up the blood on the floor before it dried. It was terrible gory work, but before long it was finished. Bobby rinsed and rinsed the rags until the water rushing through the fabric was no longer pink. Once he was satisfied he drug Santa's bag of presents into the laundry room and closed the door. Then he took several garbage bags, two rolls of duct tape and went back to the closet where he collected the body and headed down into the basement.

Wave after wave of nausea swept over Bobby as he laid out the plastic and then hit the button to return Santa to his 3 dimensional form. He set the body on the plastic and then took off the belt and the special watch. He did one more pat down of Santa's body to see if there were any accoutrements that he might've missed.

When he didn't find anything, he wrapped the body securely in the plastic and then used the duct tape to seal everything in place. Then he slid the belt back around the plastic package and pushed the button to make it weightless. He carried the body back upstairs and deposited it back into the closet.

He shut the door and wiped his forehead with relief. He'd just closed and locked the closet when a voice from behind him nearly scared him into his own early grave.

"What do ya got there Dad?"

It was Abigail.

He spun around, momentarily angry that she'd startled him so badly, but then he got sight of her and any flicker of anger melted away.

Abby was pointing at the watch and the belt in his hand.

Bobby tried to ignore her question and instead asked one of his own. “What are you doing out of bed- we’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

“I keep hearing things on the roof. Ash insists it’s Santa. But I have some friends that say Santa doesn’t exist...”

“Oh, he exists alright.” Bobby suddenly cut himself off.

A whopper of a story popped into his head, he could bring Abby into the conspiracy- it would be a bonding experience.

He thought, “Let’s see her mother top this one- she’s going to have to do more than sweep her off to Disney world to outdo playing Santa for real.”

Bobby knelt down in front of his daughter so he could see how serious he was about what he was going to say.

“Can you keep a secret?” He asked.

Abigail nodded her head eagerly. She loved secrets as only a ten year old can love secrets.

Bobby took a deep breath and then told his daughter the most outrageous lie he’d ever uttered in his life.

“Santa Claus is a friend of mine. He came up sick this year and he’s asked me to take over his route. The only problem is, he was too sick to explain to me how to work all of his equipment, he just sent everything over with his sleigh. It’s up on the roof.”

Abigail laughed. “No seriously Dad, I thought you were going to tell me a secret.”

Bobby made a big act of looking shocked. “You don’t believe me?” He asked incredulously.

His daughter emphatically shook her head that she didn’t believe him even a bit. But after she shook her head she looked right at him, he could see in her eyes she wanted what he was saying to be true. What kid wouldn’t?

“Alright. How about I prove it to you?” He asked, putting the belt around his waist and fastening it.

“How are you going to prove it? What are you gonna do Daddy? Fly up the chimney?” Abigail laughed again at how silly her Father was acting.

She liked when he clowned around. He used to be a lot more playful before Mom went to live with her new Daddy Steve who Abigail hated on principle.

In lieu of an answer, Bobby just grinned.

“Press this button.” He said, pointing at the white button on his belt.

Giggling, Abigail pressed the button on his belt and all at once Bobby knew what it was like to be weightless.

It was mostly disorienting and caused yet another brief battle with nausea.

Abby squealed with delight, and then hushed herself, not wanting to share this magical moment with her sisters. She clapped her hands together. And then her face frowned as she realized something.

“Wait a minute. You still can’t fit up the chimney, you’re too big.”

“Yeah.” Bobby agreed, “Plus, how do I get into houses that don’t have chimneys?”

Abigail thought about her father’s point for a moment and then shook her head in agreement. “Yeah, how do you do that?”

“I’ll show you.” Bobby grinned and pushed the yellow button.

The experience of being folded down in dimensional space is a tad difficult to express in words, it was a bit like being folded in half a few hundred times and when it was over, he was like a conscious piece of paper, able to slide under doors through windows.

Abigail gasped to see her Dad go flat. But then he moved around. It was a bit weird because she could see his lips moving but she couldn't hear what he was saying.

"I can't hear you." She said to her paper thin father.

Bobby reached down and hit the yellow button again.

"I said that this was how I can get into places and go up chimneys. If I'm weightless and super thin, there's nowhere I can't go."

"What does the red one do?" Abigail asked, pondering what other wonders could be held in her Dad's magical belt.

"I don't know, I haven't pushed it yet."

"Give it a try." She said, nudging his hand toward the button.

Bobby pressed it.

A voice suddenly sounded from out from the vicinity of the belt buckle, "Please do not hit this button again unless there is an emergency, if you wish to contact headquarters, please do so via the normal channels. Thank you."

"What was that?" Abigail asked, bending down and staring at the belt buckle.

"I guess its Santa's emergency alarm, in case he gets in some kind of trouble."

"It said something about a headquarters."

"Sure, Santa's headquarters is at the North Pole." Bobby said, as if that explained everything.

"Okay, what about the green button? You've pressed all the other ones."

"I pushed it earlier, but it didn't seem to do anything."

Abigail looked at her father. "Of course it does *something* Daddy. It's on Santa's belt isn't it?"

Bobby couldn't really argue with that. He pushed the green button. Everything seemed the same.

Through the window Bobby caught a view of some lights flashing- apparently the police were investigating the gunshot. One of his neighbors must've called the cops. Bobby rushed over to the window.

When he did he heard Abigail gasp.

"What?" He asked, concerned.

"You just went across the room at like a thousand miles an hour! You almost looked like you disappeared and reappeared by the window." Abigail said, her large brown eyes shining with admiration for Bobby who, after all, was a personal friend of THE Santa Claus.

He pushed the green button again, his attention was split between his daughter and the police car that was coming slowly up the street, the searchlight on the driver's side was slowly panning across each house, one after the other.

On the bright side, the siren wasn't running so Bobby didn't think the cop knew exactly where the gunshot was coming from- or probably if it was a gunshot at all.

Realizing he really needed to get out of sight, Bobby pushed the green button a third time and raced across the living room, stopping only long enough to pick Abigail up

on his way down into the basement. He went to the downstairs window and peered out at the street.

“What is it Daddy?” Abigail whispered, smart enough to know that she should be quiet.

“We don’t want the police to see us.”

“Why?”

“Shh- I’ll tell you once they’re gone.” Bobby said, thinking the stalling would give him a moment to come up with a story.

Outside the police car stopped in front of the house. The cop inside, an Officer Ray Thompson, thought he saw someone in the kitchen window, and then all at once the person was gone. Now that he had a better look at the place everything looked fine. The neighbor that called was actually from the block over, and they weren’t sure at all where the sound came from.

“It was probably just a backfiring car or something.” Officer Ray thought, and began to move the car again. As his head turned away from the house the search light reached the height of the roof. If he would’ve been looking, Ray would’ve seen the light reflecting off the wary eye of a reindeer that was seriously starting to wonder what was delaying Santa’s return.

In the basement, Bobby slowly let out a sigh of relief as he watched the car drive away.

“We need to get going sweetheart, now I want you to go upstairs and get your coat. Be sure not to wake up your sisters.”

“But why were we hiding?”

“Because the police are always trying to arrest Santa Claus.”

“Why? I thought the police were good guys. You told me the police were good guys.”

“They are. It’s just most police don’t believe in Santa Claus and so when they see someone going into a house without a key- they naturally get a little curious.”

Abigail nodded her head. Then she asked, “I really get to go with you, just me?” She looked at Bobby hopefully.

“Yeah honey, even though I don’t feel comfortable leaving your sisters alone, I think we gotta do this one solo.”

Abigail nodded, clearly pleased.

Ally and Ashlyn were twins; three years younger than Abigail. Bobby decided he needed to leave them at home because they were the most inquisitive children on the planet and asked a million questions about everything. They were also stubborn, and often refused to do anything without an extensive explanation- throwing massive tantrums if they were ever forced to leave until their interrogation was finished.

Bobby knew they were just smart and curious, and under normal circumstances he enjoyed watching his children’s young intellects ponder a problem, often coming to the most outrageous 7 year old conclusions. But sometimes there wasn’t enough time to think- you just needed to act. Bobby knew the numbers on his wrist watch were still counting down and he was supposed to go to literally millions of houses before the night was over- there was no more time for questions.

Abigail raced up the stairs and to her room. Bobby followed.

But before he reached the stairs he stopped, and ran back over to a box sitting in the corner that was full of old winter clothes. On top, right where he remembered it, was his old winter coat. He yanked it out of the box and slid it on. This way he wouldn't have to open the closet door and possibly get caught.

Satisfied with his own cleverness, Bobby rushed up the stairs where he met Abigail coming down from upstairs. He motioned her into the kitchen which led into the laundry room. There he revealed Santa's bag of gifts, which impressed Abigail mightily.

They put on their boots and walked quietly out the front door, locking it behind themselves. Bobby said a little prayer that the twins would be safe in his absence. Then he took Abbey by the hand and pushed the white button on his belt.

Together they floated gently up to the roof, buffeted by the wind.

Landing on the roof, they were immediately faced with a line of 8 reindeer, three sets of two and then two singles in the front. Behind the reindeer was a magnificent sleigh that up close resembled the sleek design of an Italian sports car.

"We're really going to fly this thing Dad?" Abigail asked. Before he could answer she added, "Can I pet the reindeer?"

Bobby was faced with a bizarre dilemma. On the one hand, how could he tell his daughter, "No, you cannot touch the magical flying reindeer." But on the other, there was the possibility that the magical flying reindeer was carnivorous. You couldn't make assumptions just because someone at some time wrote a cute ditty about one of the creatures a few years back.

Of course he let her pet the reindeer.

They were gentle, just as Bobby rationally expected them to be, and Abigail giggled joyously as she scratched the front reindeer's nose and it glowed a bright red.

"Daddy! It's really Rudolph!"

"All myth is based on some kernel of fact." Bobby remembered hearing some guy say on the Discovery channel say. Apparently Rudolph was no exception.

Then he wondered, if Rudolph is real, are there really reindeer games?

"Wow Dad, come check this out." Abigail said, knocking Bobby out of his thoughts.

He walked around to the sleigh and looked in. It looked like the cockpit of a spaceship. A second later Abigail was inside and getting ready to start pushing buttons.

"Wait a minute, I have to get in first."

"I was gonna wait." She said, smiling at him, knowing full well she wouldn't have waited.

Bobby got into the sleigh and took a moment to inspect the control panel. There was an array of digital screens, but they were all dormant. Then, among the high tech gear, Bobby sighted what appeared to be two pieces of leather hanging down from the dashboard. Bobby reached out and took the pieces of leather in his hands.

As soon as he picked up the reins an entire heads-up display, like the kind they build into fighter jets, suddenly popped up in front of him. As he looked out through the windshield every house in view was now superimposed with an address, the names of who lived there, and what presents they were supposed to get. All of the houses to his left also had a red X over them while all of the houses on his right were green. It was easy to figure out the green houses where the ones he still needed to visit.

Abigail was just stunned by what she was seeing. Her eyes roamed across the different screens- the sleigh told them everything, wind speed, altitude above sea level, latitude and longitude to 4 decimal places, there was even a digital naughty and nice display.

“Do you want to try to move this thing?” Bobby asked.

“Yeah, let’s go. We’ve got lots of houses to visit.”

It was clear to Bobby that the straps of leather were meant to be the sleigh’s reigns, so he snapped them once and said, “Gittyup!”

Instantly the sleigh lifted off of the roof top. The feeling was exactly like when he pressed the white button on his belt. It turned out the sleigh was the easiest thing in the world to control.

All Bobby had to do was push his hands forward to go faster, back to go slower, up to go up, and down to go down, it was so easy he thought he would let Abigail fly it before the night was out.

But first he wanted to find out what the sleigh was capable of. Once he was sure he had the basics of controlling the sleigh down pat, he pushed his hands forward almost to the dashboard and took off like a rocket into the night.

Even though they were going what had to be several hundred miles an hour in an open sleigh, they were totally warm in their seats. Abigail spotted a display that controlled the temperature in the cockpit- it was currently a comfortable 75 degrees.

The coolest part was, they seemed to be magically glued to their seats. No matter how sharply Bobby steered the sleigh, there was no sense that they were wildly changing direction- even though they obviously were.

Which was when Bobby had the idea to do a loop de loop in the air.

“Do you want to try to do a flip Abby?” He asked, not wanting to do it if she didn’t want him to.

But Abby loved roller coasters, she could spin around in circles for days, she almost never got dizzy. She looked at him like he was crazy. “Of course I want you to do a flip Dad.”

Bobby grinned and pulled up and back on the reigns. In a long slow arc they went high up into the air until he had the sleigh facing straight out into the atmosphere. Then he pulled back further and rolled the sleigh over upside down, laughing and yelling “Whoo” the entire time. Abigail had her arms up in the air, doing her imitation of the ‘no hands’ people you always see on commercials for roller coaster parks.

Bobby brought the sleigh around getting ready to do another loop, Abigail laughed with delight and urged him to go even faster and higher on the next pass. But then he became peripherally aware of the fact that there were two more sleighs coming up behind them.

Both sleighs were led by a team of reindeer.

The twin sleds came up fast and aggressive which was weird thing for a flying sleigh led by reindeer to do.

“Dad? Who’re they?” Abigail asked, noticing the other two sleighs herself.

As they pulled up parallel with Bobby’s sleigh he had the surreal experience of seeing two copies of the man he’d killed, both scowling angrily at him.

“Bring it down.” Said the jolly fat man to his right with a sneer. He pointed a snow white glove down at the ground.

When Bobby hesitated the Santa on the left said, “Now.” It was not a request.

Reluctantly Bobby guided the sleigh down into a small field next to a school. The other two sleighs glided down with him, keeping in tight formation on either side, bringing him down the way a fighter jet would escort a hijacked plane.

As soon as the sleighs came to a complete halt, the right hand Santa bounded out of his sleigh and onto Bobby’s.

Abigail screamed.

“It’s okay little girl, I just need to have a few words with your Daddy.” Right Hand Santa smiled a gigantic and genuine smile, which melted as he turned his gaze on Bob. “What are you crazy buddy?” He walked right up into Bobby’s face, his red nose nearly pressed against his. This new Santa was a dead ringer for the dead Santa in the closet, even close up; which was more than a tad disconcerting.

“Just who the hell are you and what are you doing with Cecil’s sleigh?” Jolly Old Saint Nick demanded with a snarl.

Bobby was struck by how weird it was that Santa was up in his face. Then Left Hand Santa showed up and he actually pushed Bobby a little bit before he said, “Yeah. What are you doing with Cecil’s sleigh.”

“Santa asked my Daddy to help him because he was sick.” Abigail said defiantly to the two men she had a hard time identifying with Santa Claus even if they did drive flying sleighs and look exactly like him.

“Is that what your Daddy told you?” Asked the Santa sweetly. At least it sounded sweet to Abigail.

To Bobby, it was clear Santa knew that story to be the bullshit that it was.

“Why are there two of you?” Bobby asked, just trying to change the subject away from the big dead man in his closet.

Santa Left groaned, “What are you a moron? You think one guy all by himself could deliver packages to everyone in the entire world in one night? Even with all the various technologies we use these days to get around satellite coverage and the time space continuum. I mean just use your common sense.”

Santa Right took over, “There are exactly 934 Santas worldwide on active duty and another 500 who are retired but could go back into active service if we are able to eventually achieve total market share.”

“Total market share?” Abigail asked, not understanding.

“Yeah. You see, we only deliver toys to kids who believe in Santa Claus. If you don’t believe, we don’t show up. Kinda like Jesus. Anyway, as technology spreads, you know, the internet and all of that, more and more people hear about us and we need to keep expanding the operation. Unfortunately people seem to be getting more and more paranoid lately and we keep having... problems.”

Both Santa Left and Right stared hard at Bobby who could only stare down at the ground and pretend he didn’t understand what was being alluded to.

“Lemme guess. You thought he was an intruder. And you shot him or broke something heavy over his head or drowned him in the fish tank. Am I right?” Santa Left asked.

Bobby looked up, shocked. He couldn’t speak.

Santa Right said, “Yup. Another one down. Cecil’s the third one we’ve lost tonight. All these crazy traditionalists- they refuse to wear their vests. You’d need a tank to get through all the body armor I’m wearing.”

“Me too.” Santa Left agreed.

Both Santas knocked on their chests, the hollow thump made it clear that neither was kidding.

Huddled in a ball on the back seat of the sleigh, Abigail watched the two Santas get into her Dad’s face and say that he’d somehow killed Santa.

When she heard what the men were saying, she realized it was true. Suddenly Abigail uncurled from her ball and lashed out at Bobby. “Oh God, that sound that I heard- you didn’t drop anything! That was a gunshot. You shot Santa!”

“It was an accident; I swear. I didn’t even know the gun was loaded.” Bobby pleaded with her, momentarily forgetting about the Santas.

“You killed Santa Claus!” Abigail said again, she’d had flashes of doubt about Bobby’s story, but the sheer marvel of having the privilege of delivering Santa’s toys caused her to suspend disbelief until the job was done.

But now the truth could be told.

Her Dad whacked Santa Claus.

Surprisingly, the Santas came to Bobby’s defense.

“Now don’t get too mad at your Father, Abigail. He was just trying to protect you- that’s nothing to be upset about. Sure he might’ve been a bit quick on the trigger, but I think you know something more about what happened than you’ve admitted so far.” Said Santa Left.

Abigail went as white as a sheet.

“Yeah that’s right, we know.” Santa Right confirmed.

“Do you want to tell him or should we?”

Abigail sighed.

“I put the bullet in the gun.” She mumbled.

“What?” Bobby asked, not understanding her.

“I loaded Pappy’s gun. It was last month when we came to visit. The twins were in the other room watching TV and you were at the grocery store and I had it down and put bullets in it like I saw on the Godfather and then you came home and I had to put it back real fast so you wouldn’t see me and then I forgot and never took them back out.”

“Your Mother let you watch the Godfather?”

“She didn’t know- I was hiding behind the couch.” She turned to the Santas.

“But how did you know? Nobody saw me.”

“We see you when you’re sleeping, we know when your awake. Sweetheart we know everything, it’s right there in the song’s lyrics.” Santa Left assured her.

“Did you put the body in the closet or the basement?”

“Or the attic?”

“Closet.” Bobby said glumly.

Santa Left smiled. “I knew it, you owe me three candy canes.”

Santa Right frowned. “Yeah, yeah, you were right.”

“And I’m going to assume that you were taking it upon yourself to be Santa out of guilt.”

“And of course you weren’t smart enough to realize the same thing could happen to you or your little girl?”

Bobby felt like he was being scolded by his own Father, only the guilt he already felt far outstripped the guilt being laid on him by the other Santas.

“You guys are right. I’m an idiot. I’m so sorry, but you gotta know that it was an accident. Nobody shoots Santa on purpose.”

Neither Santa was about to contradict him. He was an idiot and it was an accident.

“Look, don’t beat yourself up about it too much. After all, we’re all clones- we can just grow another Cecil.”

“You’re clones?” Abigail asked, amazed.

“Yup, we sure are. Santa started investing heavily in technology way back in the 40’s after he got shot for the first time. Luckily he just got winged, but the incident made him realize that there were certain aspects of the job that were a tad dangerous.”

“So when you said there were 900 of you- you meant there were 900 clones of the original Santa?”

“Plus the 500 retired Santas. We all live up at the North Pole.”

“What about the original Santa? What does he do?”

“He lives in the South of France most of the year, but he spends July in the Bahamas. To fill his time he writes short stories for the New Yorker Magazine.”

“How do you keep all of this a secret?”

“We stay out of the view of the TV cameras and work quickly to clean up ‘incidents’ such as this one when they occur. Now you will tell us your address and the exact location of Cecil’s body so we can collect it and get back to work. I brought along a set of body armor for you and your daughter if you still want to do Santa’s route. We’ve found that we get better compliance on the non-disclosure agreement when we let the perpetrators do the delivery round- it’s like a penance or something for them.” Santa Right shrugged.

“We’re going to have to confiscate the watch though.” Santa Left added.

“What does it do?” Bobby asked.

“All I can say is that you wish you would’ve played with it.” Santa Left smiled mischievously, plucking it off of Bobby’s wrist. “Needless to say we’ll adjust your route so it’s small enough that you won’t need the watch. And we’ll assign an elf to watch the twins.”

“We really get to deliver the toys? Oh thank you!” Abigail jumped up and wrapped her arms around the neck of Santa Right. He laughed and hugged her back before depositing her back onto her seat.

Santa Left turned to the dashboard of the sleigh and hit a few buttons. He pointed at a 3 dimensional display of a clock that was counting down just as the watch had.

“Alright I need you two back here in this clearing before this timer counts down to one hour.”

“I hope you learn a lesson from this, both of you. Merry Christmas.”

The Santas went to their respective sleighs and without a word shot off in the direction of Bobby’s house.

Bobby and Abigail worked all night delivering toys without having any incidents. They arrived back at the field with an hour and three minutes left, just as the sun was creeping up over the horizon.

Together Father and Daughter sat in the sleigh and watched the sunrise, and as they watched this miraculous event that happens every day, they were miraculous themselves. Bobby'd never felt so close to his daughter and so he cried with joy for the first time in his life.

And that is how the night he killed Santa Claus became the best night of Bobby Nattoli's life.