Waiting Up For Santa Claus: A Cautionary Tale

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'Look!' The girl pointed excitedly, 'It's him, it has to be.'

The boy glanced at the clock on the wall, slightly confused, 'But it's not midnight yet.'

'So?'

'So it's not Christmas Day, is it?'

'But it looks just like him. And besides,' the girl said knowingly, 'It's already Christmas somewhere. Maybe he's just early.'

The two children were peeking through their curtains, trying not to be seen. Despite their mother's frequent warnings that he wouldn't come unless they were asleep, they'd been determined to catch a glimpse Santa Claus. They tried every year but they never quite managed it. This year it seemed they might have finally succeeded. At five minutes to twelve, they'd heard a noise and had scampered from their beds to investigate.

Outside, their front yard was covered with snow, the snowman they'd built earlier in the day still staring off into the distance. Beside him was a new figure, his red coat stretched across his portly belly. They couldn't see his face, but curly white hair hung down below a hat edged with fur. Beside the man lay a large sack from which spilled brightly wrapped packages. He stood slouching, one arm around the neck of the snowman. The man wasn't really moving, just swaying slightly from side to side.

The boy looked up at his sister. 'What should we do?'

The older child scratched her head as she surveyed the room they'd shared for as long as either of them could remember. A Christmas tree stood decorated in one corner while home-made streamers were strung across the ceiling. Finally, her eyes landed on the stockings that hung expectantly from the ends of their beds and an idea popped into her head. She grinned at her brother, 'Let's go out and see if he'll give us our presents now, before we go to sleep.'

'Yeah, that would be really cool.'

'We'll need to be quiet though. We don't want Mom waking up.'

The younger kid rubbed his backside, remembering how it had felt when he'd been spanked for getting into a fight at school. If she'd been mad because of that, she'd be madder if she caught them out of bed on Christmas Eve. She'd already shouted at them earlier in the evening when they were still bouncing round their room long after they should have been tucked up in bed. Twice. But this was an opportunity not to be missed. After all, how many other kids would be able to say they'd got their presents from Santa Claus himself rather than just waking up on Christmas morning and finding he'd visited them in the night?

They grabbed their stockings and crept to the door. The elder child inched it open, making sure it didn't squeak. Once there was enough room, they slipped through and snuck down the stairs, remembering to jump over the loose one at the bottom, the one that always creaked loudly when anyone stood on it. At the front door, the girl turned to her younger brother, 'You sure about this?'

He nodded enthusiastically.

She reached up and took the key from its hook before sliding it into the keyhole. It first turned smoothly and silently, then there was resistance followed by a quiet click that told her the door was now unlocked. The girl pressed down the handle and pulled it open, letting in a blast of frigid air. The two children shivered in their thin night-clothes. Outside the street was silent, the snow muffling the usual noises of the night. The man had moved away from the snowman and now stood on the far side of their front yard with his back to them. The snow round his feet was messed up as if he'd been shuffling through it rather than walking across it. His sack still lay open on the ground by the snowman, seemingly forgotten.

Leaving the door open, the girl stepped forward, feeling the snow crunch under her weight, the cold shooting up through the soles of her feet. For a moment she thought about going back for her shoes but that would take time and he might be gone before she got back. She'd just need to be quick. Running forward, she called out quietly, 'Santa, don't go, we're here. Can we have our presents now?'

Just as the girl reached the snowman, the figure in the red suit turned and she saw his face for the first time. She skidded to a halt, causing her brother to crash into her from behind, and stared at the face beneath the fur-trimmed hat. The man's pale, sallow skin was splattered with red and his white beard was stained by a thick dark fluid that dripped slowly onto the snow. His deeply sunken eyes were a dull black with no spark of life in them.

'That's not Santa Claus. Is it?' There was a frightened tone in the young boy's voice. He clung to his sister's arm. He didn't know why but

the man scared him. Maybe it was something to do with the eyes and the way they seemed to stare right through him.

'No.' The girl was frightened too. She tried to think of what to do next, but it seemed her brain had stopped working. She wanted to run, but couldn't; she was rooted to the spot.

Then the man started towards them, slowly at first but becoming faster with each faltering step. Suddenly, the girl was no longer frozen with fear. She turned and fled, pulling her younger brother with her, but it was difficult to run across the snow in bare feet. She glanced over her shoulder and saw that the man in the Santa outfit was gaining on them. As he moved, he let out a moan that sank deep into her soul.

The kids were almost back at the house when the girl's foot slipped on a patch of ice. She tumbled to the ground, pulling her little brother with her and landing heavily on her back. She pushed the boy onwards, towards the safety of the front door. As he disappeared inside, the girl rolled onto her front. The snow crumbled beneath her as she desperately struggled to get back onto her feet.

The girl yelled when she felt the man's hand close around her leg and start dragging her backwards through the snow. But it didn't feel like a real hand. While it gripped her so tightly it hurt, there was no warmth in it. Instead, it felt as cold as ice. She turned and saw the man's face again, this time much closer. His red hat had fallen from his head, but he didn't seem to have noticed or even to care. While his eyes looked lifeless, maybe even soulless, his jaw moved back and forth, causing his teeth to gnash against each other.

The girl kicked out, trying to break his grip, but even though she hit him as hard as she could he didn't seem to notice. She heard someone screaming. It seemed distant at first, but quickly grew closer and closer. For a moment, the girl wondered who it was, then it dawned on her that it was coming from her own mouth. She struggled frantically but it was no use, she couldn't get away. As the figure in the red suit loomed over her, blocking out the stars, the girl felt his fetid breath on the side of her face and realised she was going to die.

The man sank his teeth deep into her neck, ripping at her flesh. Although the girl could see her own blood spraying across the snow-covered yard, turning it a deep crimson red, she felt no pain. As the life drained from her body, the girl wished she'd listened to her mother. She wished she'd gone to sleep instead of trying to stay awake until Santa arrived.