

Berries, Babies, and Santa Claus

(from a collection of Mostly True Stories)

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MY COUSIN CHARLES CHOMPED DOWN handfuls of the red honeysuckle berries that my parents said were poison. And he didn't die. No, sir—ee. He grinned, the little seeds clinging to his gums, and said, "Don't believe even half of what your parents tell ya."

The summer of our eighth birthdays we spent afternoons in Grandpa Anderson's apple tree having deep discussions while eating green apples or throwing them at whatever hit our fancy. In addition to telling me that honeysuckle berries have no poison, Charles told me how babies are made and about Santa Claus. Although only eighteen days older than I, Charles had light years more knowledge.

At night I'd lie in bed pondering the afternoon's discussions and wondering. Did Charles speak the truth? One indisputable point was that he didn't die from eating the berries my parents told me never to put in my mouth or I would drop dead on the spot. And for several years I'd had a strong suspicion babies didn't come from Dr. Evan's black bag.

The Santa part was what caused me to question Charles' knowledge of everything true or untrue. After all, I'd seen Santa with my own brown eyes. How could I deny that experience? I knew it. And Santa knew I knew it.

Christmas Eve when I was five years old, I sat whining while my mother tried to untangle my wet hair with a metal bristled hairbrush. It was late and we expected no one that night, so the stomping on the

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front wood porch startled us. Mother and I looked at each other quizzically and a bit fearfully. Suddenly the front door flew open, and Santa Claus stood before us. I remember it as though the scene were frozen for all eternity.

I sat on a green metal stool in the kitchen facing the living room lighted only by bubble lights from the Christmas tree. My mother stood behind me patiently twisting my paintbrush straight bangs onto a curler.

Santa Claus took three big steps through the living room, stood in the light of the kitchen, and said, "Little girl, you'd better get to bed or I can't bring you any toys."

I sat with my mouth open, unable to utter a word, wet hair dripping onto the towel wrapped around my shoulders. Santa handed me a tiny brown bag filled with candy and peanuts in the shell. My hand shook as I reached to take the sack. Then he turned, with his back to us, walked across to the front room to the door, and went out. Very faint and far away I could hear the bells on his flying sleigh long after he shut the door.

For a second or two, I stared at the melted snow left by his black boots. I hopped off the stool, felt the cold water with my bare toes, then climbed back on the stool and said, "Hurry, Mom. Do my hair or I won't get any presents."

From that day forth when classmates pooh-pooed Santa, I smugly listened and grinned. I knew. It didn't matter how unfeasible the Santa Claus business was. Santa did exist because I'd seen him with my very eyes and felt the cold melted snow from his boots with my bare toes.

I could hear all the logic in the world. I heard of presents hid under beds appearing under the tree on Christmas morn. I even saw a red suit and fur beard in Mary Ellen's father's underwear drawer. But no one could convince me there was no such thing as Santa Claus.

That was until the summer we were eight and Charles came to stay with Uncle Parker and Aunt Vinnie. My mother said Charles' parents had separated, whatever that meant, and he'd come to spend the entire summer in Fillmore. The news about honeysuckle berries and the information about how babies were made caused me to question my parent's honesty and their good sense. But the Santa Claus issue was what caused my faith to falter.

After many arguments in the apple tree that summer, Charles said to me one afternoon, "If you don't believe what I say, go and ask your parents." He suggested I find a time that evening when I could have their undivided attention and ask them about the berries, babies, and Santa Claus.

After storytime the moment arrived. I'd brushed my teeth, put on my nightie, and lay in bed with the sheet pulled up tight around my

chin when they walked into the room. Before they could kiss me goodnight, I began. "Mom, Dad . . ."

"Yes?" They sat on the bed smiling sweetly down at me, unaware of what was to come.

I wanted to make things as simple as possible for them. All I needed was a yes or no. "Are honeysuckle berries poison?"

My mother's face became unfamiliar. She said, "Joleen, just do what we say. Don't eat the berries."

I propped myself up and said, "Well, they don't hurt Charles because he eats them all the time, and he says the only problem is they give you the trots."

My dad sounded peeved. "If it's such a big deal, go ahead and eat the damn things. Just remember while you're sitting on the pot, we preferred that you didn't."

If they'd lied all these years, I had to hear with my own ears, so I pressed on. "Are they poison or not?"

After a few seconds' hesitation, my mother acknowledged the truth. "They aren't poison."

With that settled, I looked them in the eye again and said, "Now about babies—how are they made, and how do they get here?" I began to wonder if admitting the honeysuckle berry lie had struck them dumb. Neither spoke. I continued, "Dr. Evan's bag has nothing to do with making or having babies, does it?"

Both started to talk at once—Mom in her nervous, hurried voice and Dad in his gruff, this-is-serious voice. After several stops and starts, they admitted babies didn't come from the doctor's bag. How they are made and where they come from was as repulsive as Charles said.

Now for the important issue. I lay board-stiff in bed and took a deep breath. With their record for truth, I dreaded the answer to what I must ask. "I want to know the truth. What about Santa Claus? You know I did see him."

My parents looked at each other, winked, and began laughing in each others' arms. Amid gales of laughter, I picked up something about Santa and Grandpa Anderson.

The truth slowly settled over me. I stared in disbelief. "Damn." I jumped out of bed, stomped down the hall, tears streaming down my face, and ran outside. Standing barefoot on the grass, I raised my arms to the stars and screamed to all the universe, "This means Charles is right."

How could I ever believe in anything again?