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## Why I Don't Believe in Santa Claus

My grandfather was a grand storyteller, but you could not count on him for accuracy. As far as he was concerned, it was the *point* of the story that mattered—that is, when he remembered the point he was trying to make. And when my grandmother, who hated cigars and had limited patience for my grandfather's storytelling, was out of the house, he'd light up a good Cuban, settle into his favorite leather chair, and launch into a tale so contrived it would make the Brothers Grimm blush.

"When I was a little boy in Paris . . ." he would begin.

"I thought it was Vienna."

"Don't interrupt, Matthew. Now. When I was a little boy in Vienna . . ."

My grandfather came to the United States sometime before World War II. He arrived from either France or Austria, wherever he felt like telling me at a given time. This was a man who knew five languages, and if he didn't like what you had to say in English, he began speaking another language. Then he would shake his head, wide-eyed and innocent, pretending he couldn't understand you. Rarely seen without a smile, my grandfather was always quick to tell a story—it was just the truth that gave him trouble.

Personally, I didn't care that his stories weren't always true. When he told a story, it was him and me, alone. My grandmother wasn't invited. She would just make fun of us, anyway. Now that I

was seven years old—almost eight, really—this was the only time it didn't feel awkward to climb into his lap and play with his arm hair. I liked to make mountains by pulling on the hairs as I listened to him reinvent his childhood. My grandfather was a retired diplomat, and he often said, "World leaders could forget their differences, I'm sure, if they'd just listen to a few good stories." Presumably, the underlying moral of his tales would make them see the error of their ways while showing them how much they had in common. I didn't know what a diplomat was, but if they got to tell stories and have their pictures taken with famous people, the way my grandfather did, this is what I wanted to do as well. They also got expensive gifts from people, and I loved presents.

I devoured his stories voraciously. I thought that if I learned to tell stories the way my grandfather did, I might be as successful as he was. But despite all his success, I knew there was one leader his stories failed to work on: my grandmother.

"Listen here, snail eater," she'd say, materializing out of nowhere, shiny silver hair falling down to her chin, and pointing a well-manicured finger at my grandfather. "Maybe they're hot on having cigar butts litter the floors of Paris, but I don't want that shit in my house. Take it to the curb."

My grandfather would mumble about how it was really his house and everyone else was just a guest—after almost fifty years of marriage, my grandfather was still trying to assert his dominance over his castle, but he never did get it quite right. So, indignantly, he finished his story—cigar defiantly lit—from a bench in Central Park, across the street from our nineteen-room apartment. "Your house indeed," my grandmother would say, slamming the door behind us. My grandfather paid the rent, but we all knew who wore the pants in my family.

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My grandfather was raised in a genteel, aristocratic Europe, where people politely disagreed over a friendly glass of absinthe. But my grandmother was born and raised in New York City, where every

waking minute is a potential street fight. These two opposing figures stepped in to raise me after my own parents—who wished to remain children themselves—abandoned me when I was still a baby. My father disappeared altogether, never to be heard from again. And my mother, seeing her own parents' offer to raise me as an opportunity to reinvent herself as a party girl, hopped on a plane and flew to Europe without a backward glance. She called exactly four times a year—on birthdays and my grandparents' wedding anniversary—and did not visit New York again until I was ten years old.

My grandparents and I lived in Manhattan, on Fifth Avenue, the only Jews in our building. Jewish delicatessens and bakeries may punctuate every other block of New York City, but thirty years after my grandparents settled on the Upper East Side's Museum Mile—that glorious stretch of asphalt from 82nd Street to 105th—theirs was still the only Jewish name in the most exclusive building in the most exclusive neighborhood in one of the most exclusive cities in the world. “She threatened to tear someone's balls off, and they let her in,” I heard people say behind my stylish, petite grandmother's back. But like so many half-truths, this, I learned, was an urban legend. The whole truth was far more typical of Old-Moneyed New York in the 1950s.

Old Money never allowed anti-Semitism to become advertised policy—it was just an unspoken rule. Review boards famously barred Greenbergs and Friedmans from inhabiting the same space as Rockefellers and Vanderbilts. Yet they compromised for my grandparents. Much later I would wonder what my grandparents compromised, in turn, to live within such gilded bigotry.

In order to live in this historic building, my grandparents must have jumped through some hoops, offered to play by someone else's rules, the most prominent of which was keep the Jewish thing quiet. For my grandfather this was no great compromise—he left religion when the world allowed Hitler to wipe out most of European Jewry. But my grandmother was a woman who thrived on being contrary. That's how I know it was my grandfather who pushed for his family to suck it up and live in that building. If his own family had lived

among princes in Europe, why should they not live among them in America, too? My grandmother, the daughter of an affluent merchant, couldn't have cared less about living among those who sneered at her family's "new money," who blocked them from membership in every prestigious social club in New York City. But for my grandfather she agreed to live in a hotbed of WASPY prejudice. It was her way of telling him, "I love you."

When she made any kind of concession, however, she'd never let anyone forget it.

"Oh, no," my grandfather told our driver once, "this is the wrong car." It was late November—well after Labor Day—and we were on our way to dinner. The driver had pulled up in the white Rolls-Royce.

My grandmother, buttoning her coat, snorted. "Howard, shut the hell up. Just get in the car," she said, grabbing my hand.

"What will people think when they see us in the white?" he asked. My grandfather was always battling to earn some neighbor's respect, reassuring people they'd made the right decision letting *these* Jews in when they had rejected so many others. He had just as much, if not more, money than his neighbors did. He had finer clothes, better cars—he had everything they did, but still he was afraid of being seen as an outsider. He had massaged Old Money until it begrudgingly paid him attention, and he was determined not to make them regret it—but his wife often refused to cooperate.

"What do you expect him to do? Take the car back to the garage while Matthew and I just stand here?"

My grandfather was silent.

"It's bad enough that I have to live around a bunch of oil paintings in suits," she continued. I was seven years old when I realized she was referring to our neighbors, not actual paintings. "Now I have to freeze when there's a perfectly good heated car, just because it's after Labor Day."

I felt sorry for my grandfather, whose refined taste was obviously lost on my grandmother. She didn't understand the benefit of appearances. If she had her way, we would have sat at home eating

Kentucky Fried Chicken out of the bag instead of going to a fancy restaurant. She took off with great strides, dragging me toward the waiting car. "Oil paintings do not run our life!"

My grandfather knew she would leave him behind, so he huffed under his breath in French and got into the white car. And once we were on our way, she put her hand in his, and he squeezed it because—though he'd never admit it—he loved his wife even more than he loved his reputation.

. . . .

My grandfather's preoccupation with the rules of our elitist surroundings was probably why our apartment was bare of the usual symbolism with which most Jewish people decorate their homes. There was no mezuzah to kiss upon entering the apartment, no "*shana tova*" cards on the fridge, no menorah to remind us of a miraculous history. All this makes me wonder now, if our neighbors didn't want us there, why was it so important for us to stay? Why did he care so much? My grandfather was something of a martyr in this way, which is great—in theory—but who wants to fight a cultural war in the elevator of an apartment building? Certainly not my grandmother. She stayed all those years on Fifth Avenue because of one proud Jewish characteristic: spite. For her, living on Museum Mile and raising hell was a constant reminder that she could not be ignored.

"Isn't my money just as good as theirs?" she'd ask whenever my grandfather would ask her to please behave in front of our neighbors.

"Sophie, it's *my* money," my grandfather would answer.

"What is this, the old country? What's yours is mine, and isn't my money good enough?"

It's strange to think my grandparents really believed that religion was the only thing separating us from our neighbors, because I wasn't told we were Jewish until I was in the second grade. And even then my grandparents only told me because I wanted to know why Santa never visited me but regularly made pilgrimages to all the other kids at school.

“Because you were bad,” my grandmother explained. “Santa only visits good children.”

Sarcasm was not something I understood. I was also more gullible than Hansel and Gretel then, and since I was often in trouble, I just nodded and took her word for it.

But my grandfather cleared his throat behind the *New York Times*.

“The cough drops are in the other room,” my grandmother said, not looking up from her crossword puzzle.

He dropped the newspaper and glared at his wife.

My grandmother rolled her eyes and turned back to me. She sighed. “Matthew, Santa doesn’t visit because we don’t celebrate Christmas.”

From what I heard, Christmas was an entire day devoted to presents, so why wouldn’t we celebrate it? My friends said Santa brought them horses and toy cars and cashmere pea coats. I really wanted a horse like the one I saw on *Mister Ed*, and I thought this Santa might be just the man to provide it.

“We have Hanukkah,” she said. “Don’t be greedy.”

*Hanukkah?* I thought. *I never get anything good on Hanukkah.*

“But why can’t I have both?” I asked.

My grandmother was a woman who had an answer for every question. She looked at me and said, “Goddamn it, Matthew, ask your grandfather.”

So I did. He put aside his newspaper, took off his glasses, and began explaining religion in a way that might appeal to a second-grader. “Christmas is the time when Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus. We don’t celebrate Christmas because we’re not Christian. We’re *Jewish*.” He studied my face for a reaction.

I had no idea what he was talking about, so I nodded in agreement. He patted me on the head and returned to his newspaper. My grandmother, understanding that nothing had been accomplished, shook her head, and I walked back to my room, thinking, Who was Jesus? How was he related to Santa? Most important, where were my presents?

"This is all America's fault," I heard my grandfather say from the living room. "In France there is no Sandy Clause."

"In France," said my grandmother, "there are no Jews."

. . . .

I never knew any Jewish people in school, at least none who advertised it. My grandparents wanted me to have a well-rounded education, so they sent me to a school without religious affiliation. That was my grandmother's decision—my grandfather's only stipulation was that it be a school where the best families in New York sent their children. Since it was New York City in the 1980s, this basically meant I was a Jewish student receiving a Christian education from a secular school.

My first school was called the Briar Patch. Or the School of Happy Thoughts. Or something equally ridiculous. Like other schools on the Upper East Side, it created meaningless honors for the benefit of overeager parents who were petrified their kids wouldn't get accepted into the Ivy League universities. At my school the most prestigious of these honors was the much-coveted Student of the Month Award. It was supposed to go to one deserving student each month, but after the parents' organization threatened to cut their annual contribution to the endowment, Mr. Dennis ("Dennis the Menace" I heard some teachers call him), the headmaster, changed the rules. Now, instead of to one deserving student, the Student of the Month Award went to at least a dozen. This way all the students in the school got a shot, at least once a year, and all honorees were already on their way to the Ivies.

When my second-grade teacher placed my name on the long easel on December 1, it meant that it was finally my turn. This was big news. I was an only child, spoiled but craving more attention, and I was thrilled. After all, the lucky honoree got to wear a hat! And he or she was photographed! Sure the hat was made of construction paper—it looked more like a dunce cap than the Indian chief's hat it was intended to—but it would be *my* dunce cap. I would be the chief! Meanwhile, it goes without saying that if there

were no obvious Jews at my school, there were certainly no Native Americans.

Student of the Month honorees were always announced on the first day of each month. Even so, I was surprised, ungroomed, and that day my unruly Jewfro was in rare form. My hair had a personality of its own, and after an exhaustive effort to fit the hat on, the teacher sighed. "Here," she said, handing me the cap. "Just hold it." Then I went down to Mr. Dennis's office to have my picture taken.

December was a particularly crowded time to be Student of the Month; there were at least twenty honorees in line for the photographs. Like sarcasm, standing in line was a concept I did not understand: My grandparents encouraged me to fight for my place at the movies and the ice-skating rink, so why was it any different at school? I once told my kindergarten teacher, "My grandfather says it's okay to arm wrestle for a place in line. He said it's better than pushing people out of the way like my grandmother does in department stores." When the teacher's face contorted in horror, I reassured her, "My grandmother says you have to muscle your way in because people on the Upper East Side will screw you however they can."

But that morning I was too excited to push in line, so I stood and fidgeted, anxiously awaiting my turn. I thought about how I would look in my picture and wondered if I would receive wallet-size prints for friends and family.

The other kids didn't seem as interested in their pictures, and their conversation focused on holiday plans.

"I hope Santa brings me a new horse this year. That last one hasn't won any competitions," said Colby Johnson, a girl from the third grade.

"Where are you spending Christmas this year, anyway?" asked her friend Margaret Vanderburg, who was always rubbing the fact that her father owned three planes in everybody's face.

"Barbados," said Colby with a tinge of pride. "We have a house there."

"Barbados?" Margaret pursed her lips and lifted her nose. "My

mother says nobody's going to Barbados this year. That was *so* last year. We're taking *one* of our planes to Mustique."

Colby began to hyperventilate. "I hope we can still change our plans! Come over later and help me convince my mom."

Margaret placed her stubby, sausagelike fingers on Colby's arm. "You are so lucky you have me as your friend."

I kept my mouth shut and avoided eye contact. I worried that if the kids found out I didn't celebrate Christmas, they'd think I wasn't as good as they were. Not that anyone from the third grade would be caught dead talking to a second-grader. But what if someone *did* ask about my Christmas plans? I had none! What was I going to do—tell them about Hanukkah? I had done some asking around and already concluded that Hanukkah's piddly eight nights didn't matter when everyone else had one giant night, with eight reindeer pulling a fat man who brought them anything they wanted. Not that any of this Santa business made any real sense. Could deer even fly? Why would people have a tree in their house in the first place? Still, it was the principle of the matter, and, like my grandfather, I wanted to be liked.

Then, inside Mr. Dennis's office, I saw I would be photographed in front of a Christmas tree with lots of presents, and my heart sank.

"Say 'Ho! Ho! Ho!'" Mr. Dennis instructed a student.

I could have taken the picture and nobody would have known the difference—nobody but parents ever saw these pictures. But suddenly the Christmas tree was wrong. I didn't understand why I was so angry so abruptly, but I refused to cooperate.

"What do you mean, no?" asked Mr. Dennis.

"I'm not taking a picture in front of something I don't celebrate. I'm Jewish." Mr. Dennis locked his jaw, but he wasn't surprised. Though my second-grade teacher had not yet sent me to his office, I had visited Mr. Dennis in kindergarten and first grade because of "behavioral problems." These amounted to eye rolling and talking back—behavior I had seen my grandmother model. What neither my teachers nor Mr. Dennis ever realized was that there were patterns to my behavior.

I caused trouble when I felt threatened. And that almost always happened on holidays. For instance, in first grade, on Mother's Day, the teacher had us sit in a circle and, one by one, recite a favorite thing about our mothers. Well, what was I supposed to say? *My favorite thing about my mother is how she never calls or visits.* No thank you. I was so scared someone would figure out I didn't have a mother at home and laugh at me that I ran across to the art-supplies table and knocked it over. Pasta and rice and finger paints spilled all over the carpet. My teacher was so furious she sent me directly to Mr. Dennis. But Mr. Dennis didn't ask me any questions, either. Instead he stared at the space just above my head and recited some jargon about the school's high expectations. Because he was afraid of upsetting parents—they were potential donors, after all—he never bothered calling home to investigate. Now it was Christmas, and I was causing a scene all over again, but he still didn't get it.

"Matthew. Just say 'Ho! Ho! Ho!' and smile," he said, not smiling. "You want to be a good boy so Santa comes and visits you, right?"

"I don't care about your dumb Santa. I'm not Ho! Ho! Ho!—ing anything, and I already told you I'm not taking a picture in front of a tree I don't celebrate!"

"Fine," he said, snatching the hat out of my hands. "Then you can't be Student of the Month." I knew that he didn't want to make a scene and that if I apologized, all would be forgotten. I'd get my picture taken, and he'd be on to the next child. But I was really angry now.

"I don't want to be the dumb Student of the dumb Month!" I shouted. "It's not like you need me. You have twenty other jerks right here!" I ran out of the room, and Mr. Dennis screamed after me, "Rothschild, you'll never be Student of the Month again!"

I ran past the classrooms of my school and saw for the first time that each was decorated with Christmas propaganda. There were cardboard cutouts of Santa and those little dwarfs he carted around with him. Some classrooms had plastic dolls wearing sheets hanging around a barnyard. Christmas, Christmas, everywhere, but not a single present for me! When I finally returned to class, my teacher saw

that I was crying. She quietly asked her teaching assistant to take over and pulled me aside.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“Mr. . . . Dennis . . . took . . . He took my hat. . . .” I sobbed.

After calming down, I told her what had happened. I asked her to call my grandmother; I wanted to go home. I could have asked for my grandfather instead, but I was already scheming beneath my tears. I knew what would happen if my grandmother showed up, and I wanted revenge. “Oh, he did, did he?” I could hear my grandmother shouting through the receiver when my teacher called her. “I’ll drop-kick his Santa-loving ass from here to Macy’s.”

When my grandmother showed up, I heard her long before I saw her.

“Where is he? Where’s that son of a bitch?” she was shouting. “I’m going to call the United Jewish Appeal. I’m calling the Associated Press! Does he know I’m on the board of Hadassah?”

She was not, but she knew that her bluff would be taken seriously, and she was quickly ushered into Mr. Dennis’s office. These were halls where children were encouraged to speak in a whisper, where “sucks” was a terrible word, and my grandmother’s intrusion was not welcome. My teachers blushed and closed the door.

The PA system beeped. It was my grandmother, paging me, calling me down to Mr. Dennis’s office. I could also hear Mr. Dennis in the background saying that it was his office, his intercom to use. Before the message ended, I heard my grandmother telling him to shut up.

“If you weren’t so stupid, I—”

The intercom went dead, and the class stared at me in a mixture of curiosity and awe. I shrugged my shoulders.

True, she wasn’t the type of grandmother who baked or knitted; she was the type who would bail you out of jail or take bartending jobs on the weekends for the free drinks—except she had married my grandfather and was relegated instead to a world of charity luncheons and teas. She lived for confrontations like these.

Walking into Mr. Dennis’s office, I saw that the color had

drained from his face. My grandmother's face was red, as if she had sucked the color out of Mr. Dennis's. My grandfather sat chomping on a cigar. Since retiring, he often tagged along with my grandmother, entertained by a woman who could make attending the movies an adventure. Secretly, I know he envied my grandmother's problem-solving style: a cross between physical violence and public humiliation. Unlike my grandfather, she didn't care what people thought, and that was her not-so-secret weapon.

"Mr. Dennis has something he would like to say to you, Matthew," announced my grandmother, sitting down.

Mr. Dennis withered under her gaze and turned to me. "I'm sorry that it seemed I wasn't respecting your cultural beliefs. I never meant to insult your religion; I just thought you were fooling around."

"And?" said my grandmother.

"We should have had another scene for your picture."

"And?"

Mr. Dennis looked at her, his eyes pleading. "You can't be serious."

She raised an eyebrow. "One phone call," she said. "That's all it would take."

It was like watching a private conversation between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev. *My guns are bigger than your guns*, she was saying. Mr. Dennis was just another oil painting in a suit to her, and he would be knocked from his pretentious pedestal.

My grandfather's cigar sat poised on his lips.

"And . . ." Mr. Dennis sighed, lowering his voice. "There's no Santa Claus."

"Ho! Ho! Ho!" said my grandfather, lighting up the cigar.

It was like hearing that there is no such thing as the Tooth Fairy or Thanksgiving.

"But I've seen him," I said. "On the street ringing his bell, asking for money."

"No, Matthew," said Mr. Dennis, "those are men in costume. Santa is pretend."

I had been wondering how Santa could be both black and white and still be the same man.

"This will be our little secret," said Mr. Dennis. "Okay?"

"Okay," I said, wondering whom I would tell first. I thought of Chandler, a kid from my class who had bragged all about the great presents Santa was bringing him, and I imagined him crying over this news. A smile spread across my face.

"That'll do," said my grandmother. "Come on, Howard, let's take Matthew to lunch; it's almost his feeding time."

"Do I get my hat back?" I asked.

Mr. Dennis reached into a drawer for the hat and set it on his desk. I studied it, then looked at him.

"Well?" he asked.

"He wants you to put it on his head, moron," said my grandmother. "What, have you never seen a child before? Do they not grow them where you come from?"

Mr. Dennis turned red, and he attempted to secure the hat on my head.

As we were leaving, my grandfather said, "Why do we pay so much money for inadequate American education? This never would have happened in France."

"Yeah," said my grandmother, "it's much better in France, where they've replaced study hall with lessons on how to blow perfect smoke rings with your unfiltered cigarette."

My grandfather started to say something, but my grandmother cut him off.

"Get in the car, Howard; I have a menorah to dig out of storage."

And although I expected it—we were right in the middle of December, after all—I did not hear him complain once that the car was white.