

Since it's the holiday season, I bet you're all gearing up for Christmas or Hanukkah or Kwanzaa or whichever holiday you celebrate, or none at all. Each one has some different traditions: for Hanukkah, the celebration lasts eight days and you open one gift each day; for Kwanzaa, each of the seven days is assigned a principle and the festivities on that day are centered on that principle. But for Christmas, it's only one day, and that day is about gift-giving and celebrating and family (and of course food, but that's not important for this story).

One of the traditions I'm sure everyone is familiar with is the story of Santa Claus. The big guy with the white beard in the red coat who comes down your chimney and leaves you a bunch of presents under a big lighted tree. What a lot of you don't know, however, is that everything you think you know about Santa Claus is completely, entirely, 100 percent false. I know this from experience, mind you, so I'm not just making this up.

You see, when I was younger, the most exciting thing to do on Christmas Eve was to stay up all night and try to catch Santa when he came in. I did this for *years* and never made it past ten o'clock. But finally, one year, I made it. I managed to catch Santa Claus at work, and good golly was I shocked at what I found.

Trying to catch Santa requires tons of preparation beforehand. You have to make sure you buy the crunchiest cookies you can find. Everyone knows he loves chocolate chip, but those don't make nearly enough noise when he bites into them. One year I actually left some potato chips out in addition to the cookies, hoping that the crunch would wake me up if I happened to doze off. It didn't work, sadly. You have to leave the milk in a glass cup on a hard table, so that it makes noise when he sets it down. And then there's where you hide out. It can't be somewhere he can see you, otherwise he'll put a spell on you to make you fall asleep before you notice him. So for all of you who have tried sleeping on the sofa right next to the tree, that's why you never made it. The stairwell was what worked for me.

But that's beside the point. What I'm saying is, everything you've heard, seen, or been taught about Santa Claus is false. And before anyone gets any crazy ideas that he doesn't exist, let me tell you now that you're wrong. He definitely does exist, just not as we think he does.

'Twas the night before Christmas, and I was sitting in the stairwell at about twelve-thirty in the morning after having drank two cups of tea with dinner. I usually wasn't allowed to have tea in the evenings, but my parents had made an exception because they didn't think I would actually follow through with my plan. So I had been sitting there for five hours, needing to pee very badly as I recall, when I heard a *thump* on the rooftop. Thinking it was reindeer, I started getting excited and moved down lower on the stairs to peer around the wall into the living room.

I have a woodburning stove, so I was waiting for Santa Claus to somehow open the door from the inside and step out onto the carpet, or, if that was too tight a fit, for his little elf Silver Spurs (For those who are unfamiliar, Silver Spurs is the keyhole elf who flits through the keyhole and unlocks the door on houses that don't have a fireplace for Santa to get through) to come through the doorhandle. But I was surprised when, all of the sudden, a little man just materialized in the middle of the room.

I was shocked; this guy couldn't *possibly* be Santa Claus. He was wearing a polo shirt and jeans, of all things, and was nothing like any of the pictures or stories about Santa Claus that you and I are familiar with. Of course, my little brain immediately jumped to the conclusion that he was some anti-Santa who came to steal presents, so I kept watching to make sure that he didn't take anything.

But he waved his hand and a bag materialized beside him. It didn't just pop into existence like *that*; it started out as just a shimmer that quickly solidified into a big burlap sack. He reached into it and produced a puzzle box just like the one I had seen at the store, set it under the tree, waved his hand over it, and it was magically wrapped in the same design paper as everything else under the tree.

This guy, to give you a better idea of just how un-Santa-like he was, was short, so skinny he was nearly scrawny, bald, and wearing a mint-green polo shirt tucked into dark-colored jeans with a leather belt. And Converse All-Stars, of all things, on his feet. No red and white coat, no hat, no boots, and no beard.

At this point, now that I was sure he wasn't going to steal all of our presents, I decided to make myself known. I stepped out from behind the wall and looked up at the man (who was still taller than me).

"Who are you?"

He jumped about a foot in the air and spun around, looking extremely flustered at having been discovered.

"Shoo! Go to bed. You didn't see anything!" he said, waving at me to go away.

"Who are you?"

The man sighed. "I guess you're not going to leave me alone, are you?"

I shook my head.

Sigh. "Fine." He sat down on the couch and picked up one of the gingerbread cookies I had left for him. He picked it up and bit into it, eating the whole thing before he turned to look at me again.

"So as you've probably noticed, I'm really not fat and bearded and dressed all in red. I don't know where that rumor ever started, but it seems to have stuck. Every time some kid manages to catch me, I have to go through this same explanation again." He took a drink of the milk, leaving a white milk moustache about his upper lip. I giggled and he wiped it off, glaring at me.

"I'm Santa Claus," the skinny man said. "I magic my way around the world once a year and drop off presents. It's not nearly as complicated as reindeer and chimneys and complicated magical air currents that only flow on Christmas Eve. I just mutter a few words and I appear in the next living room with a tree."

"So you don't have magic reindeer and a big sleigh?" I asked.

The man shook his head and picked up another cookie. My mom and I had baked them that morning just for him. "No flying ones. I do have a few that I keep at home, but they don't have any magic about them. And the only sleigh I have is the one that they pull around the village for dates."

“You mean there are other people at the North Pole?” I suddenly had a very strong desire to go to the North Pole and visit the people who lived up there with him.

“It’s just like any other town, but much colder. We even have a post office. How do you think all those letters get delivered? That’s my day job.”

I had no idea what a “day job” was, but from what I had heard from my parents, I was able to figure out that he meant he worked at the post office to get money. This confused me; did nobody know who he was? Why did Santa Claus have to make money? But since he was getting up, I swallowed those questions as he waved his hand and mumbled some nonsense syllables and his bag slowly dissipated.

“Well, I must be moving on now,” said skinny Santa. “You go back to bed, and please don’t spill my secret to anyone or you might just find yourself on the naughty list next year.” He said it with a wink, but since the naughty list is just about any child’s worst fear, I fervently nodded my head. He waved his hand over his own head and mumbled again, and just like his bag, he slowly dissipated into nothing.

Needless to say, I’m now on the naughty list since I told you this. And I can almost guarantee that if you tell anyone else, your name will end up there too. My advice to you all is to give up on catching Santa, because secrets never stay secrets, and if you want to get Christmas presents from him in the future, it’s best not to tell tales about him.