

## A Santa for Ginnie

“Santa’s coming! Santa’s coming!” Ginnie’s gonna puke, she’s so excited. We’re sisters, and I love her to bits, but she can drive me crazy. “Wait...does he know we’re at Dad’s?”

“Santa lives next door. Of course he knows,” I joke. “And stop playing with my fan. You’re gonna break it.”

“No, no, not Mr. Schultz. I mean the real Santa. The real Santa!” Her face is going blotchy. She’s gonna cry. Not in the mood for jokes, I guess.

“Don’t worry. It’s Christmas Eve. He’ll be here.”

But Ernie should’ve been home ages ago. And he’s been working, so he should have money. The problem is, that’s a lotta shoulds, and Ernie doesn’t do well with shoulds.

Ernie is Ginnie’s real dad, not mine, but I still call him Dad. I’ll be honest, I don’t think he gives a hoot about Christmas or Santa. Mom says he’s not mean, just thoughtless. He’d rather drink beer and watch TV. Not that she’s one to talk. We’re supposed to be with her, this year. But she’s got this fancy new boyfriend, and he’s invited her to have Christmas with his family, la dee dah. So guess who gets dropped off at Ernie’s, like a coupla hot potatoes? I bet she hasn’t even told the new guy about us yet.

“I’m stayin’ up an’ waitin’.” Ginnie’s pretty smart, but she’s only five and she still believes in Santa. I’m ten, so naturally I’m twice as smart. “S’ my stockin’ straight? Yours is all crooked. What if he doesn’t want crackers? Isn’t it s’pose to be cookies? Milk and cookies! We need milk and cookies!”

“Shut up. Who doesn’t like crackers?” I say. “And give it back. That’s mine.” The thing is, all we’ve got is crackers. Not counting those gross pickle-y things at the back of the fridge. And the bag of Mr. Noodles that Mom left us. I’m really surprised to be saying this, but I’m almost getting sick of Mr. Noodles. They used to be my favorite. It’d sure be nice if Ernie got paid today. “And everybody knows that Santa doesn’t come if you’re awake.”

“You shut up. You’re stupid. Where’s Dad? Does grown ups have to be sleeping too?”

“Absolutely positively,” I reply. “Of course they do.” And I shut my eyes and make snoring sounds, which makes her laugh, and then she makes snoring sounds too, and then we’re both laughing and jumping around like crazy hyenas.

He’d better get here soon, that’s all there is to it. Sometimes he stops at the White Spot for a beer, but they’ll be closed by now. That’s where Annie works, his new girlfriend. I bet she gives him free beers. I even bet that’s why she’s his new girlfriend. Hey wait... maybe he’s at Annie’s! Her number’s on the fridge.

“Okay look, don’t do anything dumb,” I say to Ginnie. “I’m going over to Mr. Schultz’ to use the phone.”

“I wanna come too.” I knew she’d say that.

“You can’t. Don’t be a scaredy-cat.” But her face starts to go blotchy. “Okay, okay, fine. Hurry up.”

There’s four trailers behind the sausage factory. Ernie’s is the last one. Mom calls it Trailerville. The sign on the highway says BBQ Sausage, Double Smoked Bacon, Custom Processing. I asked Ernie once what custom processing means, and he said some things, kid, you don’t want to know. Then he said, you better behave though, that’s a hint. Whatever that means. Mr. Schultz’ is the next trailer over. He’s old and fat, and makes dumb jokes, which is probably why he doesn’t have a girlfriend. Doesn’t matter though. He’s nice.

No one in Trailerville ever hangs up Christmas lights. It’s dark and snowy, so I hold onto Ginnie’s mitten as we crunch over to Mr. Schultz’. We stand at the bottom of his step and I knock as hard as I can, with mittens on.

If there were ever a contest for the person who looks the most like Santa Claus, Mr. Schultz would win, hands down. He’s even got a real white beard. It just makes sense that every Christmas, he’s Santa at the mall. When he answers the door, he’s taken off the coat and hat, but he’s still wearing the red pants and the big boots. His suspenders are stretched over his belly, and he’s wearing a grubby long-sleeved undershirt. In one hand, he’s got a can of beer, and in the other, a half-eaten chocolate bar. He looks up and down the dark lane, swaying a bit, and frowning.

“Hey, Mr. Schultz,” I say.

“What the hell!” I think I scared him. “Oh, it’s you guys. Didn’t see ya down there. I knew it had to be someone. Not Santa though, ‘cause that’s me. What’re you two doin’ out so late?”

“Sorry to bother you, Mr. Schultz. Could we use your phone? We need to call our Dad.”

“It’s a ‘mergency,” adds Ginnie. Mom always says to say it’s an emergency.

“What? Ernie not home yet? Ya, sure, c’mon in. Before you turn into Christmas trees and someone sticks lights on ya.” He holds his hands out sorta like a tree and smiles at Ginnie, but she just squeezes my hand tighter. Still not in the mood, I guess.

Mr. Schultz’ trailer is a lot tidier inside than Dad’s. Not nearly as much junk. But it’s colder, and it kinda smells like old pee.

“The phone’s right here,” he says. To Ginnie, he says “C’mon, stand over here, where it’s warm.” And he points at the kitchen stove. The oven door is open, and there’s a chair in front. I know what that means, he forgot to pay his oil bill. That happened to Mom once, and we had to do the same thing. “I’m just getting ready to take off, y’know. Hook them reindeers up and get goin’.”

His phone is weird. It’s black and fat and heavy, and you have to hold part of it up to your ear with one hand, and turn a big dial thing with the other. There’s no answer at Annie’s. I try twice and let it ring ten times. Then I try Mom. She answers right away, but she sounds funny, kinda like she’s nervous. “Golly,” she says. “I’m not sure. Maybe just wait. He’ll turn up.” Probably the new boyfriend is listening. She’d never say golly normally. Not in a million years.

“That’s okay,” I say to Mr. Schultz after I hang up. “Thanks anyway. Sorry to bother you.”

This sucks. I’m pretty old. But Ginnie’s only five. Christmas is supposed to be special when you’re five. I’m mad and I’m sad and I want to go home, before my eyes start watering in front of Mr. Schultz.

“Hey, you guys aren’t a bother. Wanna know who’s a bother? Rudolph. You wouldn’t believe the presents he leaves me. So... where’s Ernie, anyway?”

“It’s okay,” I lie. “He’ll be home soon. He’s just working late. C’mon Ginnie, let’s go.”

“Of course. It’s Christmas Eve, right? He’s not gonna miss Christmas.” He goes to the window and stares at where Dad’s truck should be parked. “Hey, you guys eaten?”

“No, ya, we ate already, didn’t we, Ginnie? Lotsa stuff.”

“We had Mr. Noodles,” she says. She’s standing in front of the oven, staring at the glowing red burner. I didn’t even think she was listening.

“Good, ya, I figured,” he says. “But you know what... take these, just in case.” And he gives us each a great big Oh Henry chocolate bar! “I got lots o’ them. They fell off a truck.” Ginnie’s eyes light up at that. “Y’know, that guy is so cheap. Always, I’ve had a chocolate bar at my break, always, just one. So this year he decides I gotta pay for it. Takes it off my cheque. Well, I showed him. What’s he gonna do now, fire me?”

When we get back to Ernie’s, it feels cold and empty. Ginnie’s falling asleep on her feet. I get her into her jammies and sit her on the toilet to tinkle, but she hardly even opens her eyes.

I’m pretty tired too, but there’s one last thing to do. I use a flyer from the sausage factory to wrap up my flamenco fan, and I put it into Ginnie’s Christmas stocking. It’s my favorite thing. One of the church ladies gave it to Mom, and she gave it to me. It doesn’t

look like much, but it's super pretty when you open it up, and I know how much Ginnie likes it. Hey, this may be the worst Christmas ever, but Santa's gotta leave her something.

A crash wakes me up, late in the night. A shadow is moving through the window in the kitchen. Someone is breaking in! "Hey," I shout. By the time I get out of bed, he's bent over at the counter, huffing and puffing like the big bad wolf. I turn on the light and...wait...it's Santa Claus! The real one! With a bag full of presents!

"Please don't yell," he whispers, between pants. "S'jus' me." I recognize the voice. It's Mr. Schultz. He smells like beer, and he's not talking clearly. "Da one'n only. D'reck from the North Pole." He holds up the bag to show me, but he's got it upside down, and everything dumps out on the floor, a whole stack of Oh Henrys. Mr. Schultz just looks at them. Then he collapses onto Ernie's couch.

Which would have been fine, I guess, but at that exact minute, a car pulls up outside. I can see the headlights through the window.

"Sure...now he shows up," mutters Mr. Schultz. "S'bout time."

A minute later, there's a loud knock at the door, and when I open it, a policeman is standing there. I hear a choking sound behind me, and when I look, Mr. Schultz is sitting up, staring at the door, with his hands up.

"Is this the Dunholm residence?" the policeman asks. "Does a Mr. Ernest Dunholm live here?"

"Yes, sir," I answer. "But he's not home right now."

"No, good, that's alright, I know." And he goes out and comes back in with Ernie. Who's staggering and smelling beery and singing something that sorta sounds like Jingle Bells. The policeman just kinda steps over the Oh Henry bars and drops him on the couch, right beside Mr. Schultz, who's gone to sleep. Then he comes back in with a Christmas tree. "This was in his truck," he says. "It's at the White Spot, by the way. If he can't remember."

When he leaves, Mr. Schultz is at one end of the couch, and Ernie's at the other, both snoring away. It's late and it's dark and I'm shivering. I can't think of what else to do, so I make sure Ginnie's present is still there, and then I snuggle back into bed with her, where it's warm and cozy.

I wake up to my favorite smell of all time. Someone's frying bacon and eggs!

When I sit up, I can't believe it. It's Christmas morning and the tree is up! Someone's decorated it, with little twists of flyer from the sausage factory. And our stockings are

under it, stuffed with presents! And there's a big box of tangerines! I love tangerines! Ernie and Ginnie are still asleep. Mr. Schultz is nowhere to be seen.

'Hey!' I shout, because sometimes, when I'm really happy, I shout.

"Hey, yourself," a voice says from behind the tree, in the kitchen. "Merry Christmas, sleepyhead."

"Mom! What are you doing here?"

She comes out with a big smile. "Oh, I dunno. A little bird called me, I guess. Asked me what the hell was I thinking, missing Christmas with my two favorite people." What's Mom talking about? What bird? "But hey, better late than never. And looks like Santa found you. Anybody want some bacon and eggs?"

Absolutely positively!