

Father Christmas

By Andrea Goto

*Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes.*

Walt Whitman, From "Song of Myself"

The mall Santas were always slouching, loosely bearded fakes. The one ushered in on a giant float at the close of New York City's Thanksgiving Day Parade could maybe pass for authentic, but I think that was just spectacle at work. The real North Pole, reindeer-chartered Santa didn't have time for pre-Christmas jaunts, that is, with one mid-December exception. For a few blessed hours, Santa appeared at the rented auditorium of the Cornwall Street Senior Activity Center to disperse one present to every deserving boy and girl whose parent worked at Georgia Pacific's paper mill. One present never felt like so much.

My sister and I, coordinating in red and green hand-sewn dresses, sat on either side of our festively groomed mother, and suffered through the pre-Santa programming. It was the same every year. "Joy to the World" played on a boom box hissing static like a deflating tire as the crowd anxiously found its way to the metal folding chairs. The stage sat before us, on which two flags—the American and the Washington State banners—hung from poles. Between them sat a Christmas tree decorated with paper chains drenched in sparkle dust made during the senior craft hour. To the left, a hand-drawn fireplace colored in with markers was taped to the wall, and in front of that sat a grand, wingback chair reserved for His Excellency. To the right, an endless number of wrapped presents were stacked and categorically arranged by age and gender.

The lights dimmed and the two-reel projector fluttered like a deck of cards as the bootlegged cartoon portion of the evening began. My foot began to twitch up and down after Chip and Dale took up residence in Pluto's Christmas tree, but once the films turned from Disney to denominational, I entirely spaced. I began to imagine the contents of the presents. Shoebox-sized packages lying on their side, you could bet were remote control cars. Rectangular four-by-thirteen-

inch boxes standing upright contained Barbies. But if you fell into the coveted category receiving the eight-by-fifteen package with the slanted front, you got yourself a Cabbage Patch Kid. One year the party organizers made a dreadful miscalculation, purchasing a hairdryer for every girl ages nine to eleven deceptively packaged like a Lite-Brite. We forgave Santa, but our mothers started bringing just-in-case presents in the trunk of the car.

On cue, when the final credits mercifully began to roll, Santa's ribbon of bells rang throughout the room like the chimes from St. Mark's Cathedral. Squeaky chairs sang off-key when the kids careened their nimble necks. At least two toddlers would begin to scream in pure horror as Santa emerged from the doorway bellowing, "Ho! Ho! Ho!" with one massive hand waving parade-style to the crowd. He was tall, looming, and perfectly gorgeous.

One by one, children went up to sit on Santa's lap. For most kids, this fireside chat was simply a formality. They came for the present and a red mesh stocking overstuffed with Palmer's Chocolates and Planters Peanuts. But I relished those moments with Santa. He smelled warm and musty and held me close with his hand on my leg, bracing me on his tall thigh as my mother snapped pictures. Somewhere from the depths of the white beard, a voice softly asked about my family, my pets, school; my response a nervous sputtering of half sentences, talking alternatively too quickly and too softly, averting my eyes so as not to linger on what little of his face actually revealed itself—his bulbous nose naturally red, his small green eyes burdened by fleshy lids. But my disappointing delivery didn't matter; he was a fortuneteller, already knowing my name, that I wanted the Snoopy Sno-Cone Machine more than anything else in the world, and even that I'd been mostly good that year. He defined omniscience.

When I turned thirteen, I was officially too old to attend the Christmas Party. Nonetheless, on that second Saturday evening in December I heard the familiar clang of Santa's bells but this time echoing from my parents' bedroom. Santa suddenly presented himself to me in the kitchen, bracing his tummy with one hand as he forced it to jiggle while Ho-Ho-ing it up. I blinked, hard.

"You really didn't know it was me?" he asked.

When I was growing up, Dad would take us on Sunday drives with a Playmate cooler of beer on the seat next to him, tossing the empty cans along Washington State's Scenic Loop Highway. On New Year's Eve, instead of buying fireworks, he fired his shotgun straight up into the sky. The neighbor tried to outdo him with his own pump-barrel, so the two men took turns firing until the police came. While Dad watched TV he let my sister and I pull his gray and thinning hair into pigtails and color his faded tattoo—an outline of a blooming rose with a banner across the stem bearing his ex-wife's name, "Donna." He neutered our cat with a rubber band.

My father, Santa Claus.

Born on my great-grandfather's farm in the Northwestern-most part of Washington State, Dad spent the first months of his life sleeping in a dresser drawer because he was too big for the cradle. When the dresser tipped over and closed him inside, he was moved into bed with his parents until the second baby was born. Dad was the eldest of the three boys—Del, Dewey, and Dixon—all baring a triplet-like resemblance to one another with lanky frames and goofy grins so wide that their eyes disappeared beneath droopy eyelids. With their wayward blond curls, rosy complexions, and farm-crusting hands, the boys looked like filthy versions of the cherubic children in Dutch paintings, smiling stupidly at the base of oversized windmills.

From Holland, my father's great-grandpa landed in a Dutch colony in Michigan, but in search of a better America, headed west, stopping just short of falling into the Pacific Ocean. There he homesteaded Lynden with a few other Dutch families who were simply too tired and too proud to return to Michigan when they saw things weren't all that different. Great-Grandpa Stremmer built a farm in the flatlands near the Canadian border, and began the family's tradition of attending the Second Christian Reformed Church (a stone's throw from the First and Third), making *Hoofd Kaas* (head cheese) and *Hollandsche Olie Bolen* (fried cakes) for the old woman affectionately called "Grandma Down the Hill," and preparing the children for an uncertain future by withholding affection.

A Depression-era childhood taught my father that nothing is guaranteed. A scavenging raccoon may raid the coop, mercilessly tearing the heads off the hens' auburn-feathered necks and then slurping yolk from the remaining broken teacups. A desperate cow ripe for slaughter may resist capture, running through the fields like a madman on fire. When the sledgehammer finally hits the mark on the skull, the beast's muscles have already gone tough with adrenalin. At dinner the boys would chew and chew until their jaws ached, then casually cough the meat into their hands and press it into the pockets of their jeans, hoping my grandfather wouldn't notice; if he did they'd be forced to swallow the half-masticated lump, gagging it down through dripping tears and snot. If he didn't notice, my grandmother would discover the meat days later while raking the boys' dusty jeans across the soapy washboard and then serve it to them for supper in the fashion of stew.

When my father was nine, his parents left him to watch over his brothers while they went to church. The boys were engaged in mock-rodeo play, pressing their skinny thighs against the calves' ribs to stay upright, when the alarm sounded at the fire hall, screeching across the hay fields. Dad ran inside with his brothers chasing behind and turned on the radio. The Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor.

"What does it mean?" the youngest asked.

"Just what it sounds like. The Japanese are attacking us," Dad replied.

"Could we die?"

"I suppose we could."

By the time my grandparents returned, Dad's stomach had filled with warm sickness in spite of his steady voice instructing his brothers to pull the shades and remain under the table. They were all sent outside to play.

"But we could be killed!" protested Dewey.

"Nonsense," said Grandma.

And with that she shooed the boys outside, then sat next to the radio with my grandfather, squeezing his hand in hers and swallowing what felt like grief. Outside, Dad hid his brothers in the woodshed until they were called in for supper.

If my father believed in anything, it was only because he saw it with his own eyes. He knew about gravity because he fashioned parachutes from handkerchiefs, tying them to the cats and throwing them out of the barn's loft. He knew about electricity because when he slid cow manure into his grandfather's wooden shoe, the punishment was to piss on the fence. At Northwood School, a two-room schoolhouse with each row of desks indicating a separate grade, the teacher tried to tell Dad that God punishes the sinful, that math is important, and that spelling counts, but she couldn't prove any of it. He left school at fourteen having learned only one thing: how to pile wood and shovel coal—the punishment for not believing.

Some people called Dad the orneriest son-of-a-bitch they'd ever met, but he wasn't mean, he just never told people what they wanted to hear, unless of course, it was the truth. My father lied once in his whole life—he fudged his age to get out of Lynden and into the United States Navy.

The first time Dad went “over the hill,” as they call it in the Navy, he explained to the judge that love was to blame—he hitchhiked from San Diego back to Lynden to marry his sweetheart, “But here I am, back before the ship has left port.”

The second time he went over the hill, he again cited love not so much as an excuse as a reason.

The third time, he was court martialed and the weary judge, partial to honesty, sentenced him to the boat for thirty days. An easy sentence to serve given that Dad was already scheduled to be at sea.

After four years and three trips overseas, he was honorably discharged and walked off that Seaplane Tender and into the arms of his bride, who was by then visibly pregnant with his uncle's child.

With his wife, Dad raised his daughter as his own, and had a second child—a son—only believing it was his when he saw his own reflection in that baby's face. They later took in a foster son who exchanged one troubled home for another. Dad didn't stick around much after that. He rode his 1955 Indian with a gang of addicts who wore denim vests with “Patriots” embroidered across the back, stretching shoulder to shoulder; the front embellished with patches and pins from

the places they'd been, like Yosemite, Carson City, and Sturgis, the Mecca of them all. Dad began to drink heavily but probably survived laying his bike down a few dozen times because of it. One summer he and a buddy rode out of town on a whim and a few lines of coke, ending up half-conscious on the salt flats in Utah. After a heavy rain, they stood naked in a remote Laundromat waiting for their only pair of underwear to dry. They brushed their teeth with their fingers and rinsed with Ripple wine, which they kept in a goat sack slung over their shoulders. When some outlaws at the National Motorcycle Race in Castle Rock pushed my father up against a station wagon and attempted to slit his throat, he finally headed home. As he rode up the gravel driveway, his wife of eighteen years met him on the front steps, requesting a divorce so she could marry their foster son.

Dad went on his way, moving ten minutes south of Lynden to Bellingham and renting a dinky house on the front of which he built a ramp so he could ride his Harley Davidson Sportster through the door to be stored safely in the bedroom. In the winter he'd work on the bike and start it up, staining the walls with exhaust.

He met my mom at a cocktail lounge called The Alpine when a fight broke out. He shielded her from an airborne bottle of Coors Light. Unfit for the rotting panel walls and the stale beer fumes, she was a well-groomed ex-pageant queen and sorority girl eleven years his junior, who thought it strange that Dad rolled his own funny-smelling cigarettes. She told him she wanted to take a ride on his bike.

They married on Valentine's Day six months later. He sold his Harley to make the down payment on the only house they'd ever live in.

Mom's parents didn't approve of the relationship; even after my sister and I were born they refused to step foot in our house. Tired of seeing my mother fall into depression every holiday, Dad drove his bike onto their front yard and asked to speak to my grandfather.

“Sir, I know you think I'm no good, but I ain't playing games. I love your daughter and I'm gonna take good care of her and my girls.”

And he did just that.

Things were still tense, but my grandparents suddenly started visiting for Christmas dinner. They even bought Dad a box of Whitman's chocolates every year. He didn't eat chocolate, but he'd thank them anyway and pour himself a tumbler of Jack Daniels.

With virtually no education and without too much experience save peeling potatoes in the Navy's mess hall, Dad found it hard to find dependable work, but he had heard that Georgia Pacific's paper mill paid well. Guess every other man knew it too because while Dad had been riding his bike around the country, the other Lynden boys were filling every available labor position in town.

Leaning casually against the outside of the warehouse supervisor's trailer, he would wait for the door to open, at which point he'd ask, "Any work today, boss?"

"No, Del, we ain't hiring. And I sure as hell wouldn't hire a pain-in-the-ass like you even if I was."

"Well, maybe tomorrow then."

He'd open his sack lunch that my mother packed for him, unwrap the egg salad sandwich and sink his teeth into it, scattering egg bits down the front of his plaid flannel shirt. When the other Lynden boys passed by him as they headed back from their lunch break, they'd shake their heads. Dad would grin at them with a mouthful of egg.

But sometimes they would need an extra body for the jobs no one wanted like folding flock—a muscle-pulling, hand-cramping task of moving one mattress-sized layer of would-be paper after another onto a pallet. And Dad would oblige.

After three months of intermittent labor, the supervisor waved my father into the trailer and walked him into the adjoining warehouse stacked floor-to-ceiling with oversized cardboard boxes filled with toilet paper. For the next thirty-eight years, Dad careened about the cold, cemented aisles of that cardboard maze in a tow motor, inhaling heavy exhaust as he loaded and unloaded semi trucks with toilet paper. In spite of his grade-school teacher's warning, he did it without math, without spelling, and without God.

With a casserole in hand, Mom would sometimes take my sister and me down to the warehouse at dinnertime. The break room was at the back of the supervisor's trailer, wallpapered in bitter coffee and cigarette smoke. A couple of men wearing industrial-strength coats quietly hunched over their bologna sandwiches in their respective corners, others flapped cards down in a game of solitaire, Marlboros dangling loosely at the corners of their mouths. Some worked at the warehouse, but others were truck drivers waiting for cargo. If the boss wasn't there the guys who knew us would give my sister and me rides on the tow motor or spin us around in the boss's high-back rolling chair. The ones who didn't suspiciously eyed the casserole and my mother in her look-at-me sundress and oversized plastic earrings.

It took me a few years to learn that most of these men didn't like my father, taking offense at the way he greeted them when they came into the office.

"You the fuck-head that parked that semi crooked at the gate? Are you retarded? Get your ass out there and straighten it out."

The guys who knew Dad simply replied, "Aw, go fuck yourself, Del!" And they'd all have a good laugh.

He had his share of problems over the years, getting written up for stealing toilet paper or for secretly removing the casings off the supervisor's door, sticking three rotting foot-long trout inside before sealing it back up. He was continually demoted and promoted, depending on the thickness of each new boss's skin.

Thirty years ago, someone from Georgia Pacific's administration asked my father to pose as Santa Claus for the annual Christmas Party, and for some reason, he said yes. All they ever gave him in return was an assortment of dried fruit squished into a basket that was then sealed in cellophane and topped with a plaid bow.

Even though Dad retired from the mill nine years ago, he continued to play their Santa Claus. But much has changed since then. He started walking four miles a day and lost so much weight that he had to stuff the suit with a pillow. He suddenly stopped drinking after falling down

the front steps of The Yacht Club, where he was attending a charity gala my mother had dragged him to, tearing holes in the knees of his rented tux and scraping his nose on the pavement. Mom hiked up her ball gown to step over him, got the car, and drove herself home. I don't know how Dad got home, but he never drank again, claiming that he "just didn't like the feeling anymore."

The Christmas party changed too. They scrapped the movie portion of the program and started herding kids directly to Santa, who was stationed in his chair before the doors even opened. He was still the center of attention, but only for a minute because a beanbag toss and a round of musical chairs distracts kids with the promise of more stuff—chintzy prizes like the ones found in the party section at the Dollar Store. But for an hour, boys still stood tugging at their starched shirtsleeves and girls still picked clingy pantyhose from their tiny butts in anticipation of their moment with Santa, a present, and a stocking, even if the stocking had been replaced by a brown paper sack containing a bruised apple, orange, and box of raisins. The parents who had first lifted their kids onto Santa's lap had become grandparents, and the kids had babies of their own.

In 2007, a few days before Christmas, Georgia Pacific closed down the Bellingham paper mill. The mill was never guaranteed to last forever; they had been laying off employees over the course of ten years, so it came as no surprise when the announcement was made, but that was little consolation to the remaining two hundred workers who found themselves suddenly unemployed in a town that didn't have much use for the working class anymore. Because it was the right thing to do, Georgia Pacific financed one final Christmas party.

"Santa! Santa!" My eighteen-month-old daughter stood at my side waving wildly, trying to get Santa's attention from the kid on his lap onto her, still five deep in line. Santa was a pro and gave every kid his allotted twenty seconds. Plus, he forgot to turn up his hearing aid so he couldn't hear her anyhow. My heart hummed along with hers as I prayed that my overly sensitive child wouldn't suddenly panic and scream as she got closer like she did with that Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle at the Lynden Fair. Such an outburst would do my father irreparable harm in his final Santa hour, not to mention the uncomfortable horror of everyone else who waited to see his granddaughter's reaction to her first and last Georgia Pacific Christmas Party.

When her turn finally arrived, she fell silent and I felt her small hand grab my pant leg, pulling it slightly backwards. Santa outstretched his arms to her, and she leaned further away as I countered her effort with a forward nudge.

“Ava! Have you been a good girl this year? Come sit on Santa’s lap!” He patted his leg enthusiastically, desperately.

Slowly, painfully, Ava took a dozen half steps forward, using up all of her twenty seconds before being hoisted onto Santa’s lap. I lingered back while my mother bounced around me schizophrenically snapping pictures, and I realized that I had been sweating and shaking with anticipation. But there was Ava, perched on my father’s knee, leaning into his warm and musty scent and smiling into his barely-there eyes, undoubtedly sensing a familiarity that she couldn’t yet understand. No one complained when Santa lingered with his only grandchild for an additional minute. I couldn’t make out his face hidden amongst all the white, but I heard him sniff stiffly when he finally motioned to his helper-elf to bring a present. We made eye contact briefly as I lifted my daughter from his lap and his green eyes looked cloudy and red at the edges. I smiled and pretended not to see because that’s how he would want it. Ava yelled, “Bye, Santa!” a little too loudly as I carried her away.

My father, Santa Claus.