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he night was bitter cold.

I remember it so well, even though it was many years ago. The fingers of the icy winter wind pulled with all their force

at our house, which clung tightly to its old stone foundation. The snap and crackle of the burning logs seemed to sing a reassuring song: "Child, fear not the storm outside. You are safe in this warm circle of love." This night was, for me and my family, the most wonderful of nights: Christmas Eve—and this particular Christmas Eve was to be especially magical!

I looked out the window, watching the wind blowing the snow, whipping it downward in great white clouds over the edge of our roof with its row of icicles which hung like long, jagged dragon teeth. I tried to extend the range of my vision beyond the blowing snow, but the night was so dark. It was far too black for me to see much past the small patch of light that peeked through the window onto the snow below. "Maybe," I thought, "I may see Santa Claus. Perhaps, just perhaps, he will come tonight on Christmas Eve." Sometimes he did come late at night, and then on other years he came very early on Christmas morning.

Although it was long ago, I still recall how I had patiently counted the days until Christmas. Each morning, as soon as I was dressed, I would go to the calendar that hung on the kitchen wall to count the remaining days. Standing on one of the kitchen table chairs, I would take my mother's shopping-list pencil and with a broad stroke would cross off another day. Those days from Thanksgiving till Christmas passed so slowly. To me, as a child,

they seemed to shuffle along like old Mrs. Koenig, who took forever to make her way down the aisle in church to go to Holy Communion.

Finally, the days of waiting had each come and gone. Tonight was Christmas Eve! I left my sentry's post at the front window and joined my little brothers in front of the Christmas crib which was next to the Christmas tree. The dime store stable, transformed by the glow of the Christmas tree lights, became strikingly beautiful. The cardboard palm trees and the plaster camel next to the Wise Men, illuminated by the tree's lights, took on the magical wonder of some far-off land. I was about to change the position of one of the shepherds, the one with a sheep on his shoulders, when a loud knock came at our front door.

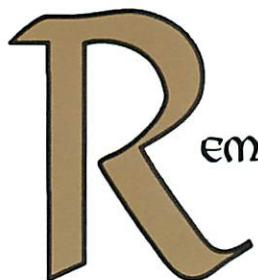


My brothers and I looked at each other with large eyes. Could it be, could it really be that he had arrived? Never before had he come when we were awake! Together we raced behind our father as he went to the front door, certain that it was Santa Claus. My father opened the door to a winter whirlwind of snow and icy cold as we boys looked up in wonder. The figure standing at our door was so tall that he filled the doorway, and he was clothed in snow from head to foot.

"Friend, I fear I've lost my way. May I come in and warm myself?" The stranger's voice was deep, as measured as a waltz and warm, even for one who was blanketed with snow.

"Come in, please," said father, ushering the man inside. "Come in and warm yourself." As the snow-covered mountain stepped across our threshold, my father quickly closed the door in the face of the raging beast of a storm. A miniature snowstorm fell about us as father helped remove the large overcoat from the stranger who was stomping his feet free of snow.

"Mother," sang out father, "we have a surprise guest. Bring him a cup of coffee, please, for he must be near frozen." Guiding our guest toward the fire, he said, "Come over here, sir, by the fire. You must be chilled to the bone. It's a bad night to be out—and a worse one to be lost."



MOVING his cap, the tall stranger shook his head free of snow. At first I thought it was too stubborn to fall away, but then I realized that it wasn't all snow. Most of it was hair! Besides a head of great white hair, he had bushy white eyebrows and a full beard. All his hair flowed outward like the rays of a bleached sun and highlighted his skin which was pink from the cold. Standing by the fire, he slowly pulled off his gloves to reveal the longest fingers I had ever seen.

"Blessings on you, friend, and on all this house, for your kindness to a stranger," he said as he sat down in a chair by the fire.

"This is a holy night, sir. There are no strangers on Christmas Eve," returned my father with a broad smile.

The surprise of the visit and the unusual appearance of the tall stranger had caused me to forget about Santa Claus—but not my little brother Tommy.

"We thought you were Santa Claus," he said with a disappointed tone. "Did you see him out there?"

"No son, but I'm sure he's on the way. You see, lads, snow and sleet don't slow down Santa Claus like they do us kind of folk."

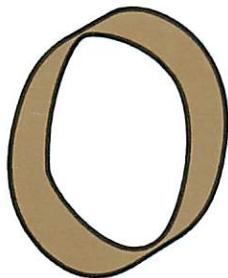
"Children, time for bed," said my mother as my older sister handed a cup of hot coffee to the stranger. "Tomorrow's Christmas, and"

"Please, please, Mom, can't we stay up a little longer? Maybe the stranger knows a story he can tell us," I pleaded.

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STORY, indeed! I know many stories, and it's truly a marvel that you should ask for one. You see, it's an ancient custom to repay the kindness of a host by sharing a story. Your parents have been kind enough to give me shelter from the storm on this bitter night. The least I can do is spin you a yarn or two."

My father smiled at my mother, tilting his head slightly to the right as he often did when he wanted her to go along with him. She smiled back and nodded in agreement, permitting the exception.



Only when I was older and understood a bit more about life did I realize the great gift the stranger gave my parents and us on that Christmas Eve night. When I was a child, times were hard, and the Christmas gifts for my sister and us boys were scarce. No extra money in those days meant few surprises or treats under the tree. On that Christmas Eve long ago, however, the offer of the Storyteller to spin some yarns more than made up for what Santa didn't bring. I've celebrated many a Christmas in my life, but that was the most magical and memorable of them all.

We boys sat on the floor around the stranger's chair, while my sister and folks pulled their chairs up close to his. The fire crackled merrily in the background as the tiny lights flickering on the Christmas tree cast a rainbow aura over the room. Setting down his coffee cup, the stranger raised his right hand in the air, and we all fell into a silence full of anticipation. Without a word, he began to move his long fingers gracefully through the air. It looked like he was indeed weaving some invisible garment as he began to spin his yarns.

Pointing to a picture of Santa Claus on a Christmas card which lay on the table, he smiled and asked me, "Do you know why Santa's so jolly and fat? I can see by your eyes that you don't. Well, this story begins with a good and holy saint by the name of Nicholas. Let me tell you how that all came about, long, long ago."