

Daddy Was Santa

John Hope

Daddy Was Santa

I found Daddy's secret hidden in a box in the attic. Dust floated in the attic's dim light like slow-moving snowflakes above the box I had uncovered. The red top with white fluff and black round buttons rested in my hands like a stolen cookie. My insides jumped at its touch because I knew what it meant. At five years old, I knew.

I remembered when I was really little last year, Santa visited our house during a boring adult party. Daddy's pilot friends were there, standing, drinking, talking – boring, boring, boring. A bang at the door and jingling bells caused Mommy to cut the music and ordered me to the front door. I opened it to a massive, round man. He *ho-ho-ho*'ed and patted my head as he entered.

I sat on his lap and smelled the familiar Old Spice aftershave. He spoke, his belly jiggling, his eyes sparkling with fun.

In the attic, I smelled the suit. Old Spice and Daddy's familiar funk. I fished through the attic box and pulled out the other pieces. The soft pants, the floppy hat, and the fake beard with a looped band. I knew this had to be his. The smell. The weird-looking black buttons. Daddy had marked the box it all came in with a big red X. This was why I waited until he was gone before I dug in.

I couldn't believe I didn't figure this out before. Daddy worked a lot. He flew huge jet planes and was gone for days at a time. Now I knew where he was and what he'd been doing.

Daddy's Santa.

When he was home, getting time alone with Daddy was hard. He'd come home and sleep in. Then he worked on the house. Then he was alone with Mommy. Then he was out at the store. Then he was doing stuff with my older sister and brother, Jenny and James – twins in high school.

I held up the costume to me. The pants were huge. They'd fit Daddy's egg-shaped body. I stepped into the pants and tossed the coat over my shoulders. They sagged over me

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like a deflated bear. The white cotton tickled my nose. I put the hat on my head and it covered my eyes. I grabbed the beard from the box and held it to my face, but it didn't stick. I tossed it back into the box.

I wanted to rush downstairs and show off this stuff to Mommy, Jenny, and James. Maybe they didn't know. Maybe they were just as fooled by the stories and disguise.

I shuffled along the loose attic planks to the ladder that led down the backside of the living room closet. Downstairs, I hiked up the pants, tiptoed out of the closet, and shut the door.

Mommy stepped up, her face looked dark and strained. "Oh Christ."

The sound of her let me know I shouldn't be wearing Daddy's suit. But the excitement of the truth bubbled out of me before I could stop it. "Mommy. It's Daddy's suit."

She yanked off the hat. "Take that off. We need to leave." She put her hands to her hips. "Jenny. Help Christopher get dressed."

Jenny stepped from behind Mommy. She pulled a brush through her hair, head tilted. "I'm doing my hair."

"Jenny."

Jenny sighed and rolled her eyes. She pulled my shoulder through the coat. "C'mon, Twerp."

Mommy said, "Don't forget his tie."

Jenny jerked me around, wrenching off the costume and my pajamas underneath. She was always rougher with me than Mommy, especially times like now when she seemed mad.

I asked, "When's Daddy coming home?"

She pursed her lips and pulled and pushed me harder.

"Ouch," I said, but she didn't ease up.

#

Pants up, buttoned up, shirt tucked, tie clipped, and shoes tied.

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I felt Daddy's secret churn inside me the whole car ride. I wanted to talk to someone about it, but everyone looked too serious, too upset. Jenny had helped me out of Daddy's Santa suit, but not once did she ask where it came from. Even James, normally the one I could count on joking, just stared out the window at the passing cars. I tossed him the stuffed dog I always kept next to my car seat. He brushed it off and ignored me.

Everyone seemed to know something that I didn't. This happened a lot. Mommy would tell stuff Jenny and James and think she told everyone. And then Jenny and James told me nothing. Times like this, I always had to wait it out until I knew.

At church, we sat in the front. Lots of Daddy's pilot friends who I normally only saw at parties surrounded us. We didn't sing the church songs we normally sang. We only did one from the bulletin and sat down. Pastor Henry talked, Grandpa got up and talked, and one of Daddy's friends got up and talked. They all talked about Daddy, calling him by his name, Nick.

But no one mentioned he was Santa. I wanted to speak. I needed to tell everyone. I knew it was his secret, but I couldn't hold it in.

Pastor Henry got back up and asked everyone, "Does anyone want to say a few words about Nick?"

I leapt to my feet and waved a hand in the air and stood on my toes.

A few chuckles.

Pastor Henry said, "Okay, Christopher."

James pulled at my arm, but I shook him off and rushed to the front. I faced the crowd and spoke loud so everyone could hear. "My Daddy's Santa."

First, there was silence. Then, they all laughed, hard. They leaned into each other, and some cried.

I said, "No, really. I found his suit." I turned to Pastor Henry behind me. "He's really Santa."

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He smiled and tapped my back. “Yes, yes.”
No one believed me.

#

In the car after church, I sat arms crossed in the backseat, refusing to talk.

Jenny spoke nonstop, so fast I doubt she took a breath. James’ face looked red, and he chewed his nails the way he did when he was in trouble. Jenny told James to stop, and they shoved each other until Mommy yelled.

My stomach growled when we approached IHOP. But we didn’t turn into the parking lot, just kept going straight. I said, “We going to IHOP?”

“No,” Mommy said.

“But we always go there after church.”

“We’re going somewhere else.”

“Do they have pancakes?”

“No.”

“But I want pancakes.”

My last words flew out like nobody heard me. But I knew by Mommy’s tone that repeating wouldn’t make a difference. I looked out the window.

I wished Daddy was here. He’d listen to me. He’d understand.

I thought about something Pastor Henry said during church. He said, “Nick’s final flight.” It didn’t mean anything at the time, but now... maybe that’s it. Maybe that was why they all laughed and James cried. Maybe Daddy lost his Santa job and everyone knew it but me. He’d no longer fly his sleigh and deliver toys. The more I thought about it, the sadder I felt.

I shoved my hands between my legs and looked out the window.

#

Daddy Was Santa

I wandered through the flowery gardens outside a stuffy room that smelled like a hundred grandmas. Butterflies fluttered and I chased them.

In the middle of my chase, I remembered an early morning a few days ago when I last saw Daddy.

I woke in darkness to the sound of clanking dishes. I scurried barefoot to the kitchen to see Daddy making pancakes. I rounded the table and touched Daddy's fancy pilot's jacket that hung over the back of his chair. Daddy stood at the stove. He wore his white and dark blue work clothes, yellow stripes on his shoulder and shiny airplane pins on his collar. His belly pushed against his clothes and his shirt was barely tucked in. The grease from the sizzling cakes smelled sweet in the air and made my mouth fill with spit.

He pushed the spatula around and looked up. "Hey, little man. You're up early."

The tiled floor felt chilly, and my undersized pajamas were little warmth. I dove to him and wrapped my arms around his leg. He felt warm and smelled like Old Spice.

He messed my hair and continued cooking.

At the table, I sat on his lap and we ate from the same plate, something Mommy never let me do. The quiet of the morning made the house feel different, and having him to lean on felt safe.

"Daddy?" I asked with a mouthful.

"Yeah?"

"Why are pancakes heavier with syrup?" I pressed the top of one and some of the goo oozed up my fork.

"Syrup weighs it down." He poked a square piece with his fork and raised it to my mouth. "But that's what makes it good."

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I sucked the square into my mouth like a vacuum, chewed, and swallowed. I licked the stickiness from my lips, and the maple sweetness returned.

After eating, we rinsed the plates in the sink and left the rest of the mess for Mommy. Daddy picked me up by the back of my pajama bottoms and flew me across the living room. I laughed out loud. He hushed me with a finger to his smiling lips. I covered my mouth with both hands but couldn't stop, and despite the wedgie, I peed a little.

He flew me into my bedroom, whispering, "Tower, do we have clearance for landing on runaway 327? Roger that." He landed me face-first into bed.

At the opposite side of the dark room, James lay in his bed. He slept like the dead, so I wasn't worried he'd wake.

I flopped to my back and hugged Daddy around the neck.

He poked a finger into my side.

I giggled and let go.

He moved toward the door.

"Daddy?"

"Yeah?" He neared.

"I love you."

He tapped the side of his nose. "See you in a few."

In the garden, I lay on the grass surrounded by flowers and stared at the puffy clouds above. Daddy's words echoed in my mind.

James's voice cut through my thoughts. "Mom's been looking all over for you."

I blinked and sat up. James towered over me.

I put my hand over my forehead to block the sun. "Uh, I was—"

"You know, that was really stupid what you said in church."

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I didn't know what to say. I kept squinting and looking up at him.

His tie looked crooked and the side of his shirt was untucked. He said, "You made some people cry."

I remembered seeing people cry, but I figured it was because they were laughing too hard. "Did I make you cry?"

He thumbed toward the building. "Get your butt back inside."

"You're not the boss of me."

He kicked me in my shoulder, and I toppled over. I grabbed my arm. "Ouch."

"Get inside."

"No!"

I jumped to my feet and ran.

"Christopher!"

I heard James' stomping shoes and felt the swipe of his hand on my back. I zigzagged through the bushes and flowers.

James called out bad words we weren't allowed to say. Then he said, "Jenny!"

I zipped behind a tree and stopped. Breathing hard. James came at me from one side, Jenny from the other.

I ran.

James dove and caught my legs.

I tumbled to the ground and rolled to my back. My eyes looked to the sky. A terrible thought hit me and the clouds looked spikey through my tears.

I sat up.

Jenny stood over me, angry, with her hands on her hips.

With James' red face, he looked ready to kill me. "You're such a little dork."

I spoke with a trembling voice, "I want Daddy."

Jenny said, "Daddy's gone."

I shook my head. "No. No he's not."

James said, "Yes. He's gone."

Jenny added, "We can't change it."

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“He’s not gone.” I tried to stand, but I slipped on the dirt and fell hard on my butt.

James mumbled something to Jenny.

She said, “He’s only five. He doesn’t understand.”

I yelled. “I do understand!” Tears hit me, filling up my nose and eyes. “I know but no one believes me.” I wiped my face, and the two looked at me with waiting faces. I breathed tears and wiped again. “Daddy was Santa.”

They didn’t say anything.

I curled my legs into my chest and hugged them. “He was Santa.” I wept.

Jenny nose was packed with snot.

James cried too, but didn’t move. His eyes grew sparkly, and tears dripped down his cheeks. After a long silence, he said, “Yeah. You’re right.” He breathed and sounded like a little boy. “Daddy was Santa.”

I hopped up and fell into him. He wrapped his arms around me. His body shook.

We stayed there for a long minute.

My mouth felt sticky and heavy like pancakes soaked in syrup. I remembered the early morning breakfast I spent with Daddy and I asked, “James?”

“What?”

“Why’d he have to be Santa?” I shivered.

He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Jenny wrapped her arms around both of us and patted our backs. “C’mon. They’re looking for us.”

We made the long walk through the gardens. I thought about the Santa costume still lying on my bedroom floor at home. Though it felt forever away, I knew someday I’d fit into that red suit, and I’d be Santa – like Daddy. As much as it scared me, I hoped that day would hurry.

Bonus Story

The Drive

I feared this drive. Shivering, the cold Sunday morning after Christmas made my teeth chatter. The minivan's wheels crunched over salted streets. I passed houses weighed down in slushy white.

My wife and kids were still asleep, warm in their beds. I breathed and raked a hand through my thinning, graying hair. Marriage. Kids. Mortgage. Bills. How'd I get this old?

I turned onto the onramp. The highway lines blurred and my mind cleared, leaving nothing else to think about but him.

Granddad.

The stench of his stale cigars and smiling yellowed teeth were carved into my memory. It had been seven years. No, nine. After my third kid was born, making the trip was impossible. That's what I told myself. Our weekly calls turned into monthly calls, then every once in a while calls, and then never. The less we talked, the less we had to talk about. I actually blamed him for wasting my precious time. When we did talk, I knew he heard irritation in my voice. Even as a child, he

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had a knack of sensing my silent barometer, slipping me candies when Mom forced veggies on me and a wordless hand on the shoulder when tears welled up.

But now... he was gone.

Dad's phone call while I was in the middle of cycling the kids through their nightly routine left me breathless. I hung up and stared at my wife like someone had just murdered my childhood. I've been in a daze ever since, packing, rescheduling, staring.

An hour passed and the dark morning lightened, but the freezing remained and made me want to pee. I pulled the car to the side of the road, jumped out, and ran to nearby bushes. Finished, I moseyed out and was half way back when I realized the minivan was gone. In its place was a blue and white car.

I stared. The highway was desolate in both directions. I spun from the bushes to the car.

A cold wind blew and I stuck my hands into my jacket pockets.

Clink.

My keys, but they felt different. I pulled them out. They looked strange yet familiar. I ran my finger over a Dodge insignia. I looked at the blue and white car and gasped.

"It's my..."

I stepped up to the car. It stood empty and quiet as if waiting for someone. I swept a hand over its slick roof. A pair of white racing stripes ran along the top. The sexy curved profile looked great even now. I hadn't thought about my Dodge Viper for years.

I opened the door, slipped inside, and breathed in the aroma of leather. From the rearview mirror hung a college graduation tassel, class of '92. I touched the dangling strands.

I gripped the key, stuck it in the ignition, and turned. The engine roared.

Overwhelmed, I laughed.

I ran a hand through my hair. “What the...?” I looked in the mirror. My head was covered with dark, wavy hair. My eyes looked bright and alert. I pulled at my face.

Car still rumbling, I looked down the highway. I had no idea what had happened, or what was happening. Still, I needed to get to Granddad’s funeral.

I closed the door and shifted into gear. The engine’s throttle was just like I remembered. The vibrations, the press against the seat, the immeasurable chills.

My parents thought I was crazy buying a brand new Viper right out of college. I had no job, student loans over my head, and no way of paying for anything. But Granddad believed. He gave me a pirate smile and punch to the shoulder from the passenger seat. The glint in his eyes negated the entire sensibility speech had Dad hammered me with. I didn’t even mind Granddad lighting up a cigar in my new car. He believed in me. That was all I wanted.

So lost in my euphoric memories, I almost ran over a transient sleeping in my lane. I jerked the wheel. The car spun. I struggled.

The car jolted to a stop.

I breathed. A giant semi blared its horn at me. I was cockeyed in his lane. I hit the gas and wrenched the wheel until I was fully in the median.

The truck flew past. A gust of wind rocked the car.

I unbuckled and stepped outside. The bum still lay sleeping in the lane. I crossed the icy road and ran to him.

I knelt. “Hey, buddy.” I touched. The pile of clothes shifted revealing a trash bag, no man.

Disgruntled, I jogged back up the road.

I stopped. Dodge Viper was gone. Instead, there stood a cream-orange AMC Gremlin hatchback, my first car. I crossed the highway and circled it. Empty and idling, its keys hung in the ignition. I opened the creaking door and sat. Even in the cold, I smelled the B.O. The engine clunked, struggling to

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maintain idle. I grabbed the wheel remembering how much I loved this piece of junk.

I shifted into gear and drove off. A car honked and swerved around me. The wheel shook nervously.

I moved my leg and knocked the rabbit foot keychain dangling from the ignition. I grabbed it.

Granddad handed me the keys on my fifteenth birthday, rabbit foot and all.

Dad snatched them away from me.

“Oh, come on.” Granddad’s stubbled face bent into a smile. “Who’s going to be my designated driver?”

Dad’s eyes burned at him. “Wouldn’t be a problem if you’d lay off the booze.”

That night, Granddad snuck to my room, threw a jacket over me, and whispered, “C’mon, boy.”

We snuck out and I drove this crappy Gremlin through darkened city streets, Granddad laughing next to me, beer in one hand, cigar in the other.

Now, heading down the highway, I felt the weight of no longer having such a powerful man in my life. He was a horrible influence and I loved him for it. Unlike my peers, he’d get away with everything, filling me with a whirlwind of childlike adventure.

I looked at my body. It was thin, scrawny. I was a teenager.

I turned off an exit, maneuvering through familiar streets I hadn’t seen in years. Same trees, same houses, same unpaved roads.

My heart leapt. The sadness of losing Granddad had somehow evaporated. I felt excited, happy.

I whipped around a tight curve, closed my eyes, and shouted, “Yahoo!”

I felt cold wind over my face.

Opening my eyes, I was no longer driving. I rode my blue bicycle. Granddad had painted my name on its side. Legs pumped the pedals. I was a kid.

I laughed, sped down Granddad's steep driveway, and slammed on the brakes.

His small, red house stood in front of me, the wooden porch he built himself looked fresh.

The front door opened.

I ran and jumped up the steps.

Granddad stepped out. "Hello, boy."

I hugged him, then looked up. "Tell me a story."

He gave me his pirate smile, cigar dangling, teeth yellow.

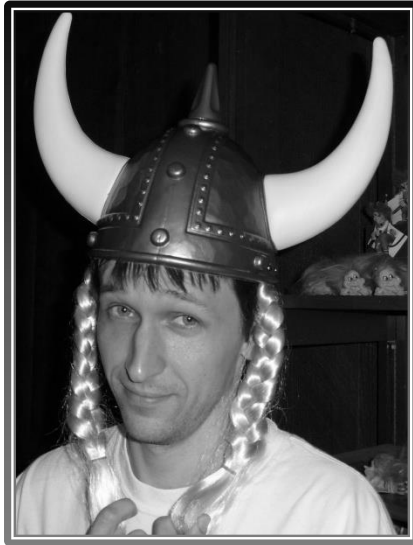
"Ever tell you about the boy who time traveled?"

We walked in. I shivered inside, hungry for his story.

I knew it was going to be good.

John Hope

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



John Hope is an award-winning short story, children's book, and middle grade fiction writer. His work appears in science fiction/fantasy anthologies and multiple collections of the best of the Florida Writers Association. Mr. Hope, a native Floridian, loves to travel with his devoted wife, Jaime, and two rambunctious kids and enjoys running. Read more at www.johnhopewriting.com.

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DEDICATION

To Jaime