The Real Santa Claus

Snow had begun to fall on the village rooftops. In the schoolyard, children ran about, bundled up in their coats, their cheeks reddened by the cold. It was the last day before the Christmas holidays, and excitement was running high. They were talking about Christmas trees, presents, Christmas crackers, and, of course, Santa Claus.

Six-year-old Elise listened to her classmates talk about what they had asked for. She herself had written a long letter a few weeks earlier. At the very top of her list was a pretty pink toy car she had been dreaming of for a long time.

But that morning, a discussion was going to disturb his joy.

"Anyway, Santa Claus doesn't exist!" exclaimed Hugo, a boy in his class who seemed to take great pleasure in contradicting others.

"That's not even true!" protested a little girl. "I heard it last year!"

Hugo shrugged.

— It's the parents who buy the presents and put them under the tree while we're asleep. My older brother told me that!

Elise frowned.

— So why do they say he lives at the North Pole? And what about the flying reindeer?

"But that's exactly it!" replied Hugo. "Have you ever seen a reindeer fly?"

Some children burst out laughing. Elise, however, did not laugh.

She wanted to defend Santa Claus, but she lacked the words. It had to be admitted that some things were indeed mysterious. How could one man visit every house in the world in a single night? How did he manage to enter houses without chimneys? And why had no one ever actually seen him?

The bell rang, ending the discussion. Yet, in Elise's head, the questions continued to swirl.

On her way home, she looked at the decorated houses, the twinkling garlands, and the fir trees behind the windows. She loved Christmas so much! But a little worry had just crept into her heart.



What if Hugo was right?

Upon arriving home, Elise decided she wouldn't be convinced so easily. She was going to conduct her own investigation.

After all, if Santa Claus existed, there must be some proof!

That evening, during dinner, she began her interrogations.



— Dad, how does Santa Claus manage to carry so many presents in just one sleigh?

His father, who was busy cutting his bread, looked up.

— Well... his sleigh is magic, my dear!

— And how does he get into houses without chimneys?

— Ah! That's a secret of Santa Claus!

Elise narrowed her eyes.

— But you, do you know this secret?



— Me? No, no! replied his father, exchanging an amused look with his wife.

Elise immediately turned to her mother.

— And you, Mom? Have you seen it yet?

— Oh, you know, Santa Claus is very discreet!

— But why?

"Because he likes to give surprises," she replied, clearing the plates.

Elise sighed. Adults certainly had a strange way of answering questions. Every time she thought she was getting close to the truth, they found some way to evade her.

The next day, the holidays finally began. And with them came a visit that Elise had been eagerly awaiting.

Her grandmother used to come and spend the Christmas holidays at the house.

When she saw her granny on the doorstep, a large suitcase in her hand and a wool scarf around her neck, Elise rushed into her arms.

— Mamie !

— My little star! How you've grown!

Grandma always smelled of lavender and Marseille soap. She had soft hands, a warm laugh, and that unique way of telling stories that made it seem like the past was never far away.



Elise adored her grandmother. She had especially noticed one thing: unlike other adults, Grandma always took her questions seriously.

Perhaps she could help him with his investigation.

In the following days, Elise transformed into a veritable detective.

She inspected the cupboards, looked behind the curtains, lifted the bed covers, and even tried to peek into the attic. She was looking for packages, wrapping paper, ribbons—any clue that might confirm Hugo's words.

But she found nothing.

Not a single toy.

Not a single mysterious box.

She was almost starting to feel reassured.

"You see," she told herself, "if Mom and Dad bought the presents, they would definitely be hidden somewhere!" Yet, a few days before Christmas, an unexpected event shattered all her certainties.

That morning, Grandma was baking cinnamon shortbread in the kitchen. A delicious smell of warm butter and vanilla wafted through the house. Mom and Dad had gone out to do some shopping.

Elise was drawing near the window when the doorbell rang.



— Grandma! There's someone here!

— Can you look who it is, darling? My hands are covered in flour!

Behind the door stood a delivery man, carrying several boxes.

— Hello, little lady! Are your parents here?

— No, but my grandmother is in the kitchen!

Grandma appeared immediately, wiping her hands on her apron. She thanked the delivery man, then asked Elise to help her put the packages on the large living room table.

— Be careful, my darling. We'll put them away when your parents get back.

Elise took the first box, then a second. But when she went to lift the third, she noticed something strange.

One corner of the cardboard box was torn.

The adhesive tape had come loose during transport, revealing part of its contents.

Elise leaned forward.

And his heart seemed to stop.

Through the opening, she could make out a small pink car.



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Not just any one.

The pink toy car she had asked Santa Claus for.

She remained motionless, her hands resting on the cardboard.

How was that possible?

This little car was exactly the one she had drawn on her letter. The same color, the same wheels, the same small steering wheel.

For a few seconds, she hoped it was just a coincidence.

Perhaps Santa Claus had some presents delivered in advance?

Perhaps his elves also used trucks?

But deep down, a little voice was telling her that something was wrong.

She carefully closed the box, turned it over to hide the tear, and slipped it under the other packages.

Then she walked away without saying anything.

She no longer wanted to draw.



In the kitchen, Grandma placed the shortbread cookies on a rack.

— Do you want one, my darling?

Elise sat down at the table, her chin resting in her hands.

— Grandma, can I ask you a question?

— Of course, my darling.

— Why do you always buy me a present at Christmas?

Grandma looked up, amused.

— Because I love you, obviously!

— Yes, but why are you buying me a present when Santa Claus already brings me one?

Grandma took the time to place her baking sheet on the worktop.

— Do you need a special reason to give something to those you love?

— No... but the other gifts come from Santa Claus, so why not yours?

Grandma smiled gently.



— Maybe because I like you to know that this gift comes from me.

Elise thought for a moment.

— Grandma... when you were little, did you also write to Santa Claus?

Grandma's face changed slightly. Her smile became more tender, almost melancholic.

— Oh yes, my dear. But my letters were very different from yours.



- For what ?

Grandmother sat down next to her.

— Because when I was little, my family was very poor. And then there was the war. We lacked many things. Sometimes we barely had enough bread for dinner. So, at Christmas, I didn't ask for a doll or toys.

— But what were you asking?

— I asked for the war to end. For fathers to return to their children. For our neighbors to have enough to eat. For the sick to recover. I even remember a little friend who was very ill. I wrote his name on my letter, asking that he regain his health.



Elise's eyes widened.

— And you were sending your letter to the North Pole?

Grandmother shook her head gently.

— No. I would take a small piece of paper, sometimes even the back of an old envelope, and write my wishes. Then I would carefully fold my letter and place it under the statue of the Infant Jesus in the manger.

— In the nursery?



— Yes. That was my Christmas list.

Elise seemed surprised.

— But how could Santa Claus receive it if you didn't send it?

Grandma smiled mysteriously.

"You know, my dear, we all have a guardian angel. And I believe that our angels carry our prayers, our sorrows, and the deepest desires of our hearts to Heaven. They know to whom to entrust them."

— To Santa Claus?

"To the real Santa Claus," Grandma replied gently. "The one who knows each of his children and knows what they truly need."

Elise remained silent.

She didn't yet understand everything her grandmother meant, but her words seemed beautiful and important to her.

— And your wishes, Grandma? Did they come true?

Grandma looked for a moment at the window behind which a few snowflakes were falling.



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— Some, yes. Others took a long time. And some didn't turn out as I hoped. But I've learned that prayers are never useless, even when we don't understand the answers.

Then she added:

— You know, Elise, the most beautiful gift isn't always the one we receive. Sometimes it's the one we give. And sometimes it's simply the love we give.

This conversation remained in the little girl's mind for a long time.



That same evening, she resumed writing her letter to Santa Claus.

She reread it carefully.

A pink toy car. A box of felt-tip pens.

A doll. A building set. Books.

There were almost only things for her.

Elise felt a little ashamed.

She then took a new sheet of paper and, in her finest handwriting, began another letter.

Dear Santa, This year, I would first like my friend Lola to get better from her cough, because she is often tired and cannot always play with us.

I want Mom and Dad to be happy and have fewer worries.

I would like children who do not have a home to find a warm place to sleep.

I would like lonely people to have someone who loves them.

I wish there were no more wars and that everyone could live in peace.

I would also like the poor to have food and the sick to be comforted.

And above all, I would like Jesus to be pleased with us.

And then, if it's possible, I would still really like to have my little pink car.

THANKS.

Elise.

She gazed at her letter with satisfaction. For the first time, she felt she had written something truly important.

Then she went down to the living room.



The nativity scene was set up on a small table, near the Christmas tree. Mary and Joseph watched over the Baby Jesus lying in the straw. A shepherd carried a lamb on his shoulders, and the Three Wise Men waited a little further away.

Elise knelt before the manger, folded her letter in four and slipped it under the small feeding trough.

"There," she murmured. "My guardian angel will know where to take it."

She stood for a few moments looking at the Infant Jesus, then went back upstairs to bed.

The days passed, and soon Christmas Eve arrived.

The house was sparkling with lights. Grandma had prepared a delicious meal, and the table was decorated with fir branches and small candles. Outside, snow gently blanketed the garden.

After dinner, the family sang some Christmas carols. Then Grandma read the story of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

Elise listened attentively.

She loved this story of the little Child born in a stable, of the shepherds awakened by angels and of that star that shone in the night.

When it was time for bed, his parents kissed him tenderly.

— Good night, my darling. And above all, sleep well!

said his mother.



— Otherwise, Santa Claus won't be able to come!

his father added with a wink.

Elise smiled, but didn't reply.

She hadn't forgotten the half-open box.

Nor Hugo's words.

Nor the embarrassed responses of her parents.

That night, she had decided to discover the truth.

Lying in her bed, she listened to every sound. The house was silent. Only the wind sometimes made the shutters rustle.

The minutes passed.

Then, just as she was beginning to doze off, she heard footsteps.

Light footsteps on the stairs.

Elise opened her eyes immediately.

His heart began to beat faster.

"Santa Claus!"





She got up quietly, put on her slippers and opened her bedroom door a crack.

The corridor was plunged into darkness.

She descended the stairs slowly, taking care to avoid the creaking steps.

Upon reaching the ground floor, she noticed a faint light under the closed living room door.

Someone was there.

Elise held her breath.

She approached, leaned over, and looked through the keyhole.

In the soft light of the nursery, she made out a figure sitting in an armchair.

She was a grandmother.

She was wearing her dressing gown and holding a small rosary between her fingers.

Elise hesitated, then knocked softly.



— Mamie ?

— Come in, my treasure.

Grandmother smiled at her when she saw her appear.

— Well! What are you doing up at this hour?

Elise approached.

— Are you waiting for Santa Claus too?

Grandma gave a little laugh.

- And you ?

"Yes!" Elise replied confidently. "This year, I absolutely want to see him."

— But you know very well that he comes when the children are asleep.

— Exactly! That's what everyone always tells me. So, this time, I'm going to stay here. I'm even going to sleep in the living room!

Grandmother looked at her tenderly.



— You seem quite determined, I see.

— Yes. But you, Grandma, why did you come down?

— I came to pray for a moment in front of the nativity scene.

— At midnight?

— It's a very beautiful time to pray, on Christmas night.

Elise looked at the small light that illuminated the Infant Jesus.

— But if you stay here, Santa Claus won't come either!



Grandma smiled.

— Ah, that's right. Apparently he doesn't want to be seen.

— But why?

"That's precisely the problem...we don't see it," she concluded, laughing softly.

Elise frowned.

— It's still strange, don't you think?

Grandmother did not respond immediately.

"There are secrets that protect wonderful surprises," she said finally. "And others that eventually become too heavy to bear."

Elise didn't quite understand.

She went to get a blanket from the sofa, wrapped herself in it and settled down on the rug, near her grandmother.

— I'm staying.

Grandmother did not try to convince her any further.

They both remained silent, watching the small flames of the flickering candles...

Suddenly, a noise was heard in the entrance.



The door opened.

And Elise's father appeared, his arms laden with multicolored packages.

He stopped abruptly.

For a moment, nobody moved.

His gaze shifted from his mother-in-law to Elise, then to the gifts he was holding in his arms.

— Elise? But... what are you doing here?



The little girl stared at the packages.

She immediately recognized one of them.

A large rectangular package, wrapped in gold paper.

The shape was that of the box of his pink toy car.

Everything became clear.

Hugo's words. His parents' evasive answers. The half-open box. The gifts that Grandma bought herself.

Elise felt her throat tighten.

— So... is it true?

His father did not respond.

— Were you the one who put the presents under the tree, drank the milk and ate the biscuits that I left for Santa Claus?



He lowered his eyes gently.

Elise felt tears welling up in her eyelids.

— Santa Claus... he doesn't exist?

His father slowly placed the packages on the table.

— My darling... But Elise burst into tears again.

— I knew it! Deep down, I suspected something! But I didn't want to believe it!

She wiped her cheeks with the back of her sleeve.

Why did you tell me all that? Why did you tell me he came from the North Pole with his reindeer? Why did you pretend?

Her father knelt beside her, visibly distraught.

"We wanted to make you dream, my love. We thought we'd make you happy by letting you believe in a wonderful, magical world; apparently, it's good for children and it reassures them. And besides, everyone does it these days..."

— But that's not true, you lied to me because I'm a child, but I believed you!

These few words caused great sorrow to the heart of Thomas, Elise's father.

The child turned towards his grandmother.

— And you, Grandma... is that why you always gave me a separate gift? Because you didn't want to be part of the lie?

Grandmother gently took her granddaughter's hands.

— Yes, my darling. I wanted you to know that my gift came from me, because I love you. And above all, I wanted you to be able to discover one day what Christmas truly is.

At that moment, Elise's mother entered the living room, drawn by her daughter's sobs.

— But what's going on?

She understood immediately upon seeing the gifts and the distraught face of her husband.

She approached and took Elise in her arms.

— Oh, my darling...

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— Mom, why did you lie to me?

Her mother felt her eyes well up with tears.

Because we thought this story would make Christmas more wonderful for you. But we should have understood that you can make a child dream without hiding the truth from them. Forgive us.

His father agreed.

— Yes, Elise. We were wrong to make you believe it was a real gentleman who came to deliver the gifts. We are sorry.



Elise remained snuggled against her mother for a long time.

Then, in a very small voice, she asked:

— So... there's no more "Christmas magic"?

Grandmother slowly rose from her armchair.

— Oh yes, my darling. There is even something much greater than magic.

Elise looked up at her.

— What do you mean?

Grandmother knelt in front of the nativity scene.

— Come closer to me. I have a story to tell you. A true story, this one. And it's the most beautiful of all.

Elise approached, still trembling from her sobs.

Grandmother pointed to the small statue of the Infant Jesus.



— Do you know who this little child is?

— Jesus.

— Yes. And do you know why his birth was so extraordinary?

— Because he is the Son of God?

— Exactly. More than two thousand years ago, God loved mankind so much that He sent His own Son to earth. He could have been born in a palace, surrounded by riches and servants. But He chose to come into the world in a humble stable, lying in a manger, surrounded by Mary, Joseph, and a few shepherds.

Elise was looking intently at the nativity scene.

— Why did He come like that?

— To show us that true love needs neither gold nor a crown. Jesus came to bring light into a world filled with suffering, fear, and sadness. He came to teach us to love, to forgive, to share, and to hope.





Grandma paused.

— And you know, Elise, the real Santa Claus does exist. He's not a man dressed in red who lives at the North Pole. He's God the Father, the Father of Jesus, the One who gave us the greatest gift the world has ever received: his own Son.

Elise's eyes widened.

— So... the real Santa Claus is God?

— Yes, my darling. If we're talking about the Father of the Nativity, then He is the true Santa Claus. And His gift is infinitely more precious than all the toys in the world.

— But God doesn't come down the chimney... Grandma laughed softly.

— No, of course not! He needs neither a chimney, nor a sleigh, nor reindeer. He is present everywhere. He knows our hearts, our joys, our sorrows, and even the prayers we dare not utter.

Elise thought for a moment.

— So, when you told me that my guardian angel could deliver my letter to the real Santa Claus...

— I was talking to you about God, my dear. Angels are his messengers. We believe they watch over us and accompany us in our prayers.

Elise turned her eyes towards the nativity scene.



Her little letter was still there, tucked under the manger.

— So... He received my letter?

"I think He already knew everything that was in your heart before you even wrote it down," replied Grandma.

Elise remained silent.

Then she asked:

— But Grandma... if God can do everything, can He also perform miracles?

Grandma's face lit up with deep emotion.

— Yes, my darling. And I'm going to tell you something I've never forgotten.

She settled down on the rug, very close to the manger. Elise came and snuggled up to her. Her parents sat down in turn.

— When I was little, during the war, my little brother became seriously ill. He was so weak he could barely speak. The doctors did everything they could, but they feared he wouldn't survive the winter.



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Grandmother paused for a moment.

— I still remember my mother staying up by her bedside, night after night. We had very little medicine and almost nothing to eat. On Christmas Eve, we went to church. There was a small, simple nativity scene with a plaster Baby Jesus.

Elise listened without moving.

— My mother knelt before the nativity scene. She was crying softly. I had written on a small piece of paper: “Dear Heavenly Father, please heal my little brother. I so wish he could play with me again.” Grandmother discreetly wiped away a tear.

— We placed the paper under the manger and we prayed. We asked Jesus to stay with us, no matter what happens.

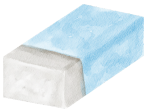
"And then what?" Elise murmured.

— That night, my little brother was still very sick. But on Christmas morning, something extraordinary happened. He opened his eyes, smiled at my mother, and asked for a piece of bread.

Elise held her breath.

— He was cured?

— Not completely yet. It took him time to regain his strength. But from that morning on, his condition improved in a way the doctors couldn't explain. We've always considered his recovery an immense blessing, a Christmas miracle.





— So God had heard your letter!

— That's what I've always believed, my darling.

Grandmother tenderly took Elise's hand.

— But you also have to understand something important. God isn't a magician who grants all our wishes like we order toys from a catalog. Sometimes we pray with all our might and things don't go as we hoped. That doesn't mean He has forgotten us. His love isn't measured by the number of times our requests are granted.

Elise lowered her eyes to her letter.

— So maybe Lola won't get better right away?

— Maybe. But you can continue to pray for her, visit her, draw her a picture, and show her that she's not alone. You see, sometimes God invites us to become a small response ourselves to the prayers of others.

These words warmed Elise's heart.



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That night, before the small illuminated nativity scene, four generations of memories seemed to converge in a single prayer. There were Grandma's impoverished Christmases, her parents' joyful Christmases, and Elise's, who had just discovered a new truth.

They prayed for those who were suffering, for those who were alone, for peace, for the children of the whole world.

Then they thanked God for the gift of his Son.

Elise thought of her friend Lola, of all the children who were cold, of those who were scared and of those who had no one to kiss them before going to sleep.



Then she whispered:

— Dad?

— Yes, my darling?

— Next year, we can prepare the gifts together? That way, I too can surprise those I love.

His father kissed his forehead.

— With great pleasure, my love.

— And we can also prepare a gift for someone who won't have one?

— I promise you.

Elise smiled.

For the first time, she knew that there was something much greater than all the wonderful stories.

A love that couldn't be bought.

A light that never went out.

A hope capable of traversing the darkest nights.

She fell asleep with a peaceful heart.







On Christmas morning, when the first rays of sunlight entered her room, she jumped up.

But instead of immediately running to the presents, she went down to the living room and knelt before the nativity scene.

She turned on the small light.

Then, in the silence of the still-sleeping house, she murmured:

— Happy birthday, Jesus. Thank you for coming.

She stayed there for a few moments, happy.

Under the Christmas tree, the packages waited patiently. Her pink toy car was certainly among them.

But Elise was no longer in a hurry.

She had discovered that the most beautiful Christmas gift was not the one you unwrapped with your hands. It was the one God had placed in a manger one evening in Bethlehem, to offer the world a light that would never go out.

And since that night, every time Elise looked at the little flame in the manger, she remembered that true miracles don't always make a sound.

Sometimes, they simply begin in the heart of a child who is learning to love...

END



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