

No Phones at the North Pole

Stephen Ciciirelli

She was beginning to suspect that Santa was a fraud. Jewish boys in school were saying things, laughing. And, besides, there were too many holes in the story. For example, why didn't Santa trip the motion detector on their home security system? Where did he buy presents? There was no Toys "Я" Us at the North Pole, *was there?* He must have shopped "on the road," Mary Colleen thought.

But if this were true, why had no one ever seen Santa, on December 24, walking through Glenview Mall with a shopping list? Why didn't he get sick from eating all of those chocolate chip cookies? How did he get around the world in the span of twenty-four hours? Mary Colleen did the math. Math was her favorite class in school. Her father's Encyclopedia Britannica said there were two billion Christians in the world. (She didn't know then that there were Christians who didn't celebrate Christmas; she had also forgotten to subtract the naughty children, who wouldn't receive presents.) She assumed—because at that age, she liked thinking of her family as *The Norm*—that there was an average of three people per household, which meant 666,666,667 Christian houses worldwide. So even if Santa had ten thousand helpers, and each helper spent only five minutes in each house, it would still take 5,555 hours or 231 days to deliver the presents, not including transit time. By the time all the presents were under their respective trees, it would be August, at the earliest, and almost time for Christmas again!

There was also the North Pole. Mary Colleen doubted, on psychological grounds, that an old man and his old wife could live at the northernmost point on earth, where the

sun didn't shine for six months and where even polar bears couldn't live because of the cold, and still be jolly enough to celebrate every year. But she didn't reject Santa for this reason. She had empirical evidence. Not of Santa's nonexistence but of some kind of conspiracy.

Three weeks before Christmas, Genevieve, her mother, called Santa, at the North Pole, she said, to make an addition to Mary Colleen's wish list. She paced the kitchen, trailing the coiled phone cord behind her like a bridal train. "Mary Colleen wants an Easy-Bake Oven, Santa," she said with playful resignation. There was a pause. "Does she deserve it? She hasn't been very nice to her father this past week." Seated at the kitchen table with her Social Studies homework, Mary Colleen was silently protesting, covering her face, and kicking her feet, for some reason more concerned with what Santa thought of her. "I'll make sure she apologizes, Santa," Genevieve said. "Will you add the oven to her list?" She waited, with the phone to her ear. She was watching the dark, starry night through the sliding glass door. Mary Colleen heard a man on the other end of the phone. His voice was deep and jocular and sloshed around by jowls, like that of a color commentator. Those cute Jewish boys at school didn't know what they were talking about, she thought. "Thank you, Santa," Genevieve said. "I appreciate it. I know you are very busy this time of year."

After she hung up, Genevieve retired contentedly to the living room to watch television beside Bob, Mary Colleen's father, who was reading something with a red pen in hand. Eventually, because of three back-to-back ten-hour days at the jewelry store, Genevieve fell asleep. That's when Mary Colleen rose from the kitchen table, went to the phone, and pressed REDIAL. She wanted to hear Santa's voice for herself. This was the

proof she needed. Even if one of Santa’s secretaries answered the phone, she could still ask for answers to some of her questions. Maybe she would discover that Santa had one million helpers, rather than ten thousand, in which case the math would work out.

When her grandmother answered the phone, Mary Colleen felt betrayed.

“Grandma!?!” she said. Her grandmother was quiet for a moment; Mary Colleen could hear the sudden rustling of papers or the popping of Jiffy Pop, her grandmother’s favorite food, on the stove.

“Mary Colleen, sweetie, it’s after ten. Why aren’t you in bed?”

Mary Colleen was trying to control herself, even though she wanted—now, more than she wanted presents—to call her mother and grandmother and everyone else *fucking liars*. “I have homework,” she said.

“Homework hours are seven o’clock to nine o’clock.”

“I’m making a presentation tomorrow about the Gettysburg Address. I need to review my flashcards. Grandma?”

“Yes.”

“Have you talked to my mom today?”

“Your mother was working all day.”

“What about tonight? Like an hour ago?”

Her grandmother knew what she was referring to. She changed the subject. “You should be in bed, sweetheart.”

“What about grandpa?”

“Your grandfather doesn’t talk to anyone. He barely talks to me. He woke up at eleven o’clock today and ate an old club sandwich for breakfast. Then we watched The

Family Feud. He is sleeping now. If you don't believe me...wait...I'll bring the phone by the sofa. You can hear him snoring." Mary Colleen told her grandmother that she didn't have to; she believed her.

"Grandma?" she said.

"Yes, princess."

"Is grandpa okay?"

"He's tired. That's all."

"Mom said he's going to die. Is that true?" Mary Colleen didn't know what was wrong with her grandfather. Sometimes when they went to her grandparents' house for dinner, he would call her Brewster, which was the name of her grandmother's dachshund, or do things that Mary Colleen at first found funny, like put the TV remote in the refrigerator or eat with his hands.

"We're all going to die, sometime, princess."

"Can you tell him I said hello?"

"I will. Now go brush your teeth and get to bed. Show grandma how well you listen."

"Okay," she said. She hung up without saying goodbye.

But she didn't forget that phone call. The following weekend, when the anger inside her had gotten too great, she confessed to her mother. They were doing some last-minute Christmas shopping, driving to Modell's to buy Bob new camping equipment. "Santa is fraudulent," she said. "I know. Christian parents invented him because they were tired of only believing in Jesus." It burst from her without provocation. She had been totally

silent, and then, just like that, she was speaking as if from a prepared speech. Genevieve was so startled that she moved into the slow lane. Neither had said very much since they got in the car. “Where did you learn that word?” she said.

“‘Fraudulent’?”

“Yeah.”

“It was a vocabulary word. A level-five word.”

“I don’t like how you’re using it.”

“But it’s true,” Mary Colleen said. “Santa doesn’t exist. Every fifth grader says so.”

“Is that really something you want to believe eleven days before Christmas?”

“It’s not a belief. I *know*.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know.”

“Do you have proof?”

“I don’t have to prove it. The burden of proof is on you. Judges don’t ask defendants to prove their innocence. They are presumed innocent.”

“‘Presume.’ That’s another big word.”

“I know that one because it’s on the cover of dad’s book.”

“You’ve been talking to your father, haven’t you?” Genevieve smirked, as if Bob were some Janus-faced classmate of her daughter’s, a confederate at the front door, complimenting her ruffle blouse from Sears but then conspiring behind her back to nullify all of her good parenting.

“Dad is a genius.”

“A few weeks ago you told me you wanted to eat dinner an hour earlier so you wouldn’t have to see him.”

“That’s because he wouldn’t let me watch *Rugrats*,” Mary Colleen said.

“But now you’re friends?” said Genevieve.

Mary Colleen forced her hands into the little pockets of warmth between each leg and the leather of the front seat. One of the many things that made her flush with cynicism was when adults—including her parents, but mostly her mother—spoke to her in the airy tones of maternal understanding or pretend curiosity. Mary Colleen didn’t like seeing her mother languish over the prospect of having to make dinner after ten monotonous hours of selling Omega watches; she didn’t like seeing her father cloistered in his office, reading dissertations, but this, she thought, was better than hiding behind a mask of normality. It was better than pretending everything was okay. Mary Colleen promised herself that afternoon that if she ever had children of her own, she would love them enough to be honest, to be happy when she was happy and sad when she was sad.

“Dad didn’t tell me there’s no Santa Claus,” she said. “The night you called Santa at the North Pole, I pressed redial on the phone. I’m sorry. I waited till you went to sleep. Grandma answered.”

“You think I was lying to you about the North Pole?”

“I did research. There are no telephones at the North Pole, mom. There are radios but no phones. It’s too cold for telephone wires. In 1980, the year I was born in, an electrical company that starts with ‘A’ wanted to put a power line under the ice, because it’s actually warmer the farther down you go, but environment groups wouldn’t let them. They said the drilling would scare away seals. Now all the people on expeditions have to

communicate with walkie-talkies.” Mary Colleen took her mother’s silence and the revving of the car’s engine as more proof that Santa Claus had been debunked. “Why did you lie to me?” she said. Mary Colleen watched her mother, a woman who, to her, seemed consummately professional and elegant, but now also a little flustered, as she glanced over her shoulder twice and returned to the fast lane.

It hadn’t occurred to Genevieve that what she’d been doing since Mary Colleen was old enough to listen—pretending to be a kind of liaison for Santa Claus—was, in effect, lying. She had written it off as one of the many beneficial secrets parents keep from their children. Good parents don’t lie, she had told herself, but they don’t always tell the truth either. Being a parent was a lot like living a double life. But what was the alternative? She didn’t tell her daughter that she and her husband sometimes had sex, and sometimes more than once, after dinner on Wednesdays. Mary Colleen would be downstairs practicing scales with her piano teacher, and she and Bob would be upstairs, saying how much they “deserve[d] this.”

Santa Claus had attached himself, like a sweet, familiar smell from childhood, to her consciousness. She wasn’t religious, but she could no sooner imagine Christmas without Santa Claus than she could imagine waking up without coffee. Christmas was one of the few times during the year that she felt unequivocally young. It wasn’t like Mothers Day—a holiday whose pretensions had revealed themselves only years after she had become a mother. Christmas was an overstated but profoundly interior celebration, really her only celebration of her accomplishments, however negligible, that year, as a mother. Without Santa, she thought, she would be transformed into something indulgent and worthy of scorn, another suburban mother spoiling her child with clothes and glitter

markers and Fisher Price kitchens that she believed, despite Bob's rejoinders, reinforced in young girls a sense of patriarchy and regressivism. (Mary Colleen used rubber strips of bacon, scoops of ice cream, French fries, condiments, Salisbury steaks, modest helpings of peas, and sunny-side-up eggs to decorate her bedroom.)

In the passenger seat, Mary Colleen was crying. Strands of her brown hair pasted to the window, her puffy down jacket hiding her skinny arms. When Genevieve saw, looking from the road to her daughter and back again, how upset she was, whether it was real or embellished, she couldn't help but lean over the console, pull her daughter to her, and kiss her on the head, the nose, and the mouth; she knew then that her stories about Santa Claus had been less like myth making and much more like child abuse. "I would never lie to you," she said.

"Then why did grandma answer the phone when I pressed redial?"

"Mary Colleen, you are a very bright girl. And you're beautiful, yummy. I don't know what I would do without you. Cross my heart. But there are so many things you need to learn about people, especially adults."

"Like what?"

"It's complicated, yummy."

"But you said I was very smart."

"You are."

"Am I as smart as dad?"

"You're smarter," Genevieve said, taking the time to hold her hand. Her mother's words, and how effortlessly and unflinchingly she'd said them, so thrilled Mary Colleen

that the question of whether or not they were true was almost beside the point. Her father was her hero; and Genevieve knew this.

Mary Colleen remembered Bob one morning editing a colleague's paper at the kitchen table—every so often he would announce things like “You've got Nietzsche all wrong, buster!” or “You're giving British philosophy way more credit than it deserves!” or “I don't know who teaches logic at Notre Dame, but they ought to feed him to the lions!”—and, for the first time, she made a goal that she would try, in the span of a lifetime, to learn *everything*. Everything that could be known. As far as she was concerned, this was not something girls or even women wished for. She was, in her mind, something of a maverick. Men like her father could read three lines of an editorial or hear the gregarious pitch of a car salesman and know within seconds whether or not it was bullshit. Mary Colleen wanted to be one of these people; and probably until her freshman year of high school, whenever she saw another girl raising her hand in class or speaking properly or being smart, she told herself that it had to be a willful act of self-deception, that the girl was trying, too hard she might add, to be a boy, that she, Mary Colleen, was the only girl, at least in Ruby Falls, who could think like a man.

No one was shocked when, in the sixth grade, Mary Colleen played on an all-boys Little League team. Some were shocked, that same year, when she had awakened to blood on her bed sheets and had refused to leave the house for a week because she said she felt like Slimer from *Ghostbusters*. In middle school, she had only one friend who was a girl, and she, the friend, liked to wear collared shirts with the sleeves rolled up. “Hey,” Mary Colleen had said when they first met, at lunch. “My dad wears his shirts the same way. So cool...”

Genevieve's mother, Edlyn, was worried, of course, but she kept her opinions to herself, which, for her, was never easy. She prayed and bought barrettes for Mary Colleen, hoping that one day she would take to them like a root to its native soil. When Genevieve asked why her daughter seemed to deplore anything that was even a little bit "girly," Edlyn said not to worry, that as soon as Mary Colleen grew breasts and got the attention of boys, they would both regret that they'd had this conversation. But the truth was Edlyn believed her granddaughter might be, in her words, "queer like that." When other girls in her grade were dreaming of unicorns and silver tiaras, she said, Mary Colleen was reading books that had only been approved for high schoolers.

"I love you, mom," Mary Colleen said, watching the highway. She would have said more, but because they were in the car, moving, she wouldn't have been able to hug her mother, which she really wanted, just then, to do.

Genevieve also wanted a hug. Since Mary Colleen had told of pressing redial, her smile had become less precise, almost violent. The flood of honest emotion to her face, culminating in her jaw, made her lips feel dry, cracked. She was happier and more reassured than she would admit to Bob later that evening; these words, *I Love You*, though generally overused by the young, single handedly made motherhood worthwhile. But Genevieve was also deeply apprehensive. This might have been the "turning point" her friend Kim, from the neighborhood, spoke of. Kim had two boys and a girl and had averred that there was a certain age, older in boys, when children go from being open and perfectly dependent to secretive and brooding. Kim said that for two of her kids "the transformation" had followed months of "pathological affection" on their part. For girls, nine to eleven years old was what a popular child psychologist called The Queen Bee

Stage. During this, the third of nine stages, girls went about unwilling to compromise, marking and fortifying their territory, sometimes, in exceptional cases, wishing death on their parents. Was Mary Colleen, she thought, because of certain charismatic personalities in school, beginning to see her not as an endless font of nurturing care or someone to confide in but as a kind of roommate with whom she shared nothing and whom it was her daily task to avoid?

“I love you too,” Genevieve said.

“So can we talk about something else?”

“I would like that.”

“Mom, don’t be mad at me.”

“I’m not mad, yummy.”

“Do you forgive me for pressing redial on the phone?”

“Of course I do. I love you so much.”

“Are you going to cry?” Mary Colleen said. “Please don’t cry.”

They took the jughandle, on the right, so they could get to the mall. Genevieve found a parking spot, probably the only one left, far away from Modell’s. She was unabashedly thin, with large gray eyes. Under her wool coat, she wore a dark tracksuit with reflective piping (if, after shopping, she wasn’t without energy, she would jog around the neighborhood, in her thermals, her usual two miles). Her blonde hair hung past her shoulders. She couldn’t look at her daughter, she told herself. The sight of Mary Colleen trying earnestly to console her would only make her cry more than she already was. Genevieve was, for some reason, more emotional around the holidays. There was something essential but also depressing about spending long afternoons with her parents.

There was a tightening knot in her chest that she never felt around her in-laws. She would see her father, along with her sister Vivian, her brother John, and others, on Christmas Day; she would watch her badly aging father, who seemed not to remember the previous Christmas, as he passed off the same unfortunate tale, a story even she had heard as a child, pretending to the grandchildren, of which there were five, that there were no presents, that he and grandma had “fallen on hard times,” and then, after the grandchildren had cried out, not unconvincingly, in shock and sadness and had tugged, to play along she assumed, on her father’s shirt, bringing them into the living room to see the tree all lit up and decorated, with even more presents than the previous year beneath it. She stared blankly at the odometer, with the rolling analog numbers. The number in the thousands place was frozen, she thought curiously, between one and two. It made her think of Bob and what he’d said about wanting a son. He would sometimes grow sentimental imagining a boy with whom he could throw a baseball in the yard or, when the time came, drink a beer at County Line. She had told herself that one child was enough, that she didn’t have the will power, at thirty-eight, the rebound in her body, to raise another child as challenging as Mary Colleen. But she loved Bob. She wanted him to be happy. She knew that the only way she would be happy was if her husband was happy. At this point in her life, a beautiful baby boy might have been the only thing she could give him that he wouldn’t in turn thank her for and then hide away somewhere in his office. “I want us to have a nice Christmas,” she told Mary Colleen. “Can we try to have a nice Christmas?”