

Laura Gilbert

The Night Before Christmas

It's the night before Christmas and all through the house... We all know the story. A strange old man with too much hair enters a chimney that isn't his, to deliver gifts and sweets and toys made by his slave-elves at the north pole, but only for the good little boys and girls. *Have you been a good little girl?* This big hairy man has twinkling eyes and rosy cheeks and round little tummy. He motions with a finger to his lips- *shhh, keep it all a secret*. This is a classic story they say, it's based on a beautiful poem they say, believe in the magic of Christmas they say.

There is a portrait in an elaborate wooden frame that hung in the front hall of my grandparent's house. My grandfather is center stage, my cousins, sister, and I surrounding him in a circle, dressed in our finest concert white collars and lace. He is sitting on the podium where he usually stood in control of everyone on the stage, of everyone in the whole auditorium. My sister is standing next to him with her hand on his shoulder. I am sitting at his feet, my head at his knees, looking up at the book in his hands- a stage sized edition of *The Night Before Christmas*. He is reading to us but not for us. The spotlight makes us glow like a halo of angels surrounding Christ. My grandfather's bare forehead glimmers between two puffs of hair in the stage lights, beads of sweat glistening, dripping, hitting the pages inside the cover. Behind us are dark shadow figures of the Chorale that he founded and grew and conducted and controlled, outlined like a mountain range in front of the dark red velvet curtain.

When I read *The Night Before Christmas* to my four-year-old, she snuggles in next to me, sucking on a corner of her blankie that she rotates around in her mouth as we read. Her blankie smells like lavender and wet earth and sour milk. The book has a green cloth cover and oversized gold lettering, a smiling Santa with his reindeer at the center, riding off into the night in front of the full moon. The pictures are so big they take up two pages. Each page folds out to reveal more on the other side, requiring great care to tuck back in without them getting wrinkled and ruined... an obvious design flaw for anyone who has read to a toddler. I read the story to my daughter as she sucks on her blanket, eyes open, taking it all in. Her eyes are always open. We have stockings but no chimney in our small starter home, so we drew flames in chalk on the wall next to our tree. Later that night my four-year-old comes out from her room, blankie in hand. Her wide open eyes swelled large with concern and fear. She says "I don't want a stranger to come into our house at night while I'm sleeping".

Tiny instinctual owl child.

The night before Christmas was when my mom went into labor with me. I don't know if I was early or late because I don't really talk to my mom, but I know I was, at minimum, inconvenient. She went into labor for some amount of hours and was ready to push before midnight. The story she tells is that the doctor who was there kept pretending he had holes in his gloves and made her wait to push so I would be born on Christmas because *what a special gift that would be*. Everyone knows you get the best doctors on holidays in the hospital. She laughs as she tells the story, as if *isn't that hilarious* that she was in the worst pain in her life, with

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/4

my head coming out of her vagina and the doctor just kept saying "Nope, hold it, another broken glove!" When the second hand finally lined up with the short hand of the clock he turned and said, "Okay- go ahead and push now". They put me in a red stocking with the other babies in red stockings in the hospital nursery. I wasn't the only one who had been blessed with being born on Christmas day... Jesus' day. I laid in that nursery surrounded by babies with names like Nicolas, and Grace, and Holly. And there was probably a Mary somewhere in there as well. Does anyone know if there was a Mary? Little red straight jackets of holiday cheer.

When a bartender, or a bank teller checks my ID and sees I was born on Christmas it goes like this:

Them- "Oh wow, a Christmas baby"

Me- "M-hmm"

Them- "What a special birthday. You must get twice the presents"

Me- "maybe half, on a good year"

Them- still imagining the good fortune... "Christmas birthday. My friend's uncle's cousin was born on Christmas"

Me- "That's too bad"



That night before Christmas, after the story reading and the not sleeping, and the big concerned eyes, I lied to my daughter. It was my first lie to her, but that might be a lie too. *Please, please, please, just go the fuck to sleep.* After soothing her for the thirdfourthfifth time that night and getting her a fresh blankie, it was past 11 o'clock and almost midnight.

I said this:

"Why don't I text Santa and have him meet me down the street?"

She looked at me with her eyes wide open the way they have always been wide open since she was born. Consideration. She took her new mostly dry blankie out of her mouth and asked

"You have his number?"

Wise owl baby.

I nodded, still looking straight into her bird eyes, trying to look convincing.

"Yes, I will text him as soon as you go to bed".

Her little round shoulders relaxed. She stopped chewing on her blankie and it fell from her lip a little bit. She gently nodded her head, eyes still glued on me, searching for any detection that I wasn't telling the truth.

I held her gaze.

"Okay" she said, and turned around and walked back to her room, blanket trailing on the floor behind her. She paused at the door, turning to look one more time with her owl eyes to make sure I was reaching for my cell phone- making sure that it wasn't just words I had said to her, that I would actually follow through with the plan.

The next morning she was full of questions:

Did you meet him down the street?

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/4

How did you carry the toys back by yourself?

What did he look like?

Can you meet him down there again next year?

Yes, baby. Yes.

I brought our red wagon.

He looked just like the pictures, baby.

Yes, I will always keep you safe.



The first time I told my mom that her father had been putting his hand down my pants I was fourfivesixseven, I still had my words and I wrote poems and made books for book fairs, and I still talked to my mom. I think the words I told my mom were “Grandpa’s touching me down there and I don’t like it”. I’m 98 percent sure I said some version of those words out loud. At fourfivesixseven I still thought I could ask for help.

Every birthday I have cried. I have cried every birthday. I have cried alone in my closet after excusing myself from the joyandcheerandforestdestroyingwrappingpaper everywhere in our living room after getting half as many presents as my sister. I have cried in the bathroom of my grandparent’s house behind the door that never locked as I waited for it to be time for dessert so someone would say happy birthday to me. I have cried in the middle of the Maine woods, in a cabin on a couch in the arms of my now husband who left his family that Christmas for the first time to be with me on my birthday. I have cried on my king sized bed because I’m an adult and people are coming over for drinks and I don’t know why I ever thought that was a good idea in the first place and *please just leave me alone like I am used to*. I have cried next to Eve and Noelle and Chris and Joseph in that damn hospital nursery with the evergreen boughs on the windows and twinkling lights and what happened to little baby Joy? Where the fuck did Joy go?

The portrait of us surrounding my grandfather on that auditorium stage remained on the same wall of their house until he died. The white paint beneath it revealed a reverse shadow once it was removed, a contrasting bright white square on the yellow faded walls. It then hung in my grandmother’s apartment for two years until she died. We had moved her into an assisted living apartment so she wouldn’t be alone, only she was more alone. She had a stroke while I was with her interviewing her for a college essay I was writing about her years assisting my grandfather with the Chorale, only I didn’t know she was having a stroke at the time. Sure, I had noticed the pee running down her leg but I didn’t want to say anything. Sure, I noticed she was slurring her words a little as she talked but I thought she was just getting old. I didn’t have the word “stroke” back then. I didn’t know the warning signs of a blood supply no longer able to connect with a brain, of a brain not getting enough oxygen to breathe and function and keep signaling the body to do the same. I didn’t know how to react appropriately to alarming situations. *Frozen non-instinctual animal*. My Uncle found her four hours later after I had left. He took her to the hospital, and after that, a convalescent home. She never returned to that

apartment.

The longer a stroke goes untreated the more brain damage can occur.

It will take 43 years for me to gather enough of my own Christmas sleighballs to say fuck you to Jesus, and ask for my own goddamn birthday. My husband and daughters are onboard. We do Christmas the day before, and I have my first only birthday without Christmas morning. My husband has covered our tree with an old white sheet and crepe paper streamers that I never buy for any parties because we're losing whole forests of trees every day and the world is on fire. There are balloons all over the ground of our living room- pink, yellow, blue. Nothing red and green in sight throughout the whole house. They have been listening. I secretly worry about what they did with our angel chimes. My girls, now 10 and 12, make me a birthday crown out of paper and tape, imitating the birthday crowns I've made for them in wool felt and with elastic bands in the back that I have to make little cuts in each year to allow them to grow. They make me strong coffee with heavy cream and birthday pancakes in the shape of a 4 and a 3 and we take pictures. We do everything we do on their birthdays. It is everything. They sing the birthday song we learned from their hippie Waldorf charter school:

*Happy birthday to you
I'm so glad you're alive
You're a gift from the earth
Bless the day of your birth*

I start to cry as they sing and my tears drip into the syrupbutter on my number 4. What they don't know is why I am crying is not because I am crying happy tears but because I am crying tears of unworthiness and guilt and shame. I am crying because I know it's Christmas and they know it's Christmas and no one is talking about how it's Christmas. I'm crying because my body knows it's Christmas which means it's my birthday which means we cry on my birthday.

After my grandmother died, my mother hung the portrait up in her house they had moved to after I had finally graduated High School and gone to college so *thank god we can move and please take all of your things away with you okay?* It hung on my mom's wall for a year after I told her about what my grandfather did to me for the second time in my life. She took it down to repaint the walls, so my Uncle put it back up at his house. My aunt & uncle lived next door to my grandparent's house in a subdivision where houses next to each other are exactly the same, only mirror images, so there it was again- the first thing you saw when you walked in the door.

The second time I told my mom that her father had molested me, we were in my car in a restaurant parking lot at night, somewhere near her new house. I was 21 and on winter break from college. I had read Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* in my Women's Lit class and nearly failed Developmental Psych because I hadn't managed to get out of bed for the last month and to go to class.

I had questions:

Do you know that grandpa molested me?

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/4

*Do you remember me telling you?
Maybe he did it to you, too?*

No,

No,

I don't know, she said.

She said, I don't know.

What nobody knows is that birthday without Christmas when I was 43, is that I had stolen that Christmas tree under the white sheet and paper streamers from Whole Foods because *fuck Jeff Bezos, he can take it*. My family, my innocent accomplices. We had walked down our street as we had done every year before, since we had decided it was better getting an already cut tree from a store we could walk to, then driving to cut a live one down ourselves and cause another casualty. We brought the red radio flyer wagon, we chose which tree was the fullest and greenest and least dead yet, and my husband and my girls started to load it up as I went inside to buy eggs and hot chocolate and pay. It was close to closing time and the three male workers left in the store were all together at the checkout stand. They were stoned and distracted so I forgot to tell them we were buying one of the pre-cut trees outside. I paid for the eggs and hot chocolate and walked out. I smiled at my family and said *"Okay let's go!"*. And we walked that fucking half dead Christmas tree right off the Whole Foods parking lot. Dash away dash away dash away all. Happy Christmas to all and to all a good night- you too, Jesus.

We've figured out how to shoot billionaires into space for joyrides on rocket ships but somehow nobody knows who or what is responsible for starting labor in a woman, whether it is the baby or the mother. Maybe it was me that sent a signal that my mom actually responded to, or maybe it was her body that was telling me it was time to get out. Maybe it was a mutual decision: working together, me inside her, inside me, connected and tethered and pushing with each other and against each other and for each other to let me break through into the light. Maybe it was the last time we really talked because we didn't need words then. Maybe it was the last time she tried to listen.

Nobody knows whether my life would be any different if I had been born the night before Christmas, if my first primal scream and gasp for air hadn't been delayed and controlled by a man's fingertips. Nobody knows the amount of gloves it would have taken to not leave a permanent mark.

What I wish I had said to my daughter that night before Christmas is that Santa isn't real. I wish I had told her Christmas is all a big lie, one that everyone has just accepted and plays along with but that we can be different. She can be different. I wish I had told her that she was right to feel scared, that a strange man entering a home was not okay, that we don't always have to pretend everything is okay. I wish I had told her that she needs to learn how to protect herself, because the truth is I won't always be able to keep her safe. The truth is I might miss the signs even if all the pages with big pictures are right in front of me. I too might still cling too tightly to an old story that I so desperately want to be true. I too may not find the words to push when I need to push. I wish I had told her that she wasn't wrong, the story was wrong. I wish I had fucking burned that book in our backyard while we howled at the moon together, destroying the

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/4

silent night as the flames reflected in her beautiful round owl eyes. I wish I had told her that magic doesn't have to be born of a lie, that magic is when you stop believing the stories you have been told, and start telling your own.