

Up on the Rooftop

By Carlton Brown

When my son was four we went to the video store (they had those then) to rent the new Superman movie, and the girl at the checkout asked my son if he wanted to be Superman when he grew up and he said, "No. I want to be just like my father." And then without missing a beat he added, "And he's 41."

I was 31 at the time.

Children need to look up to their parents, to admire them, and then they need to gradually see that there are chinks in the armour, so that they can let their parents go and internalize what they need to get themselves through the day.

And that is why I have an inner Santa Claus.

When my younger brother Ted was the same age as my son was then, I heard reindeer on the top of my grandparents' roof. We saw my grandparents often. There was an apple tree in their backyard that you could climb. There was an asparagus patch. I had never seen asparagus grow before. There was Mr. Bates who lived at the end of the street with the machine in his front hall that ate coins. And Mr. Bates did the most amazing magic tricks.

(Mr. Bates, I learned many years later, had been my grandfather's boss, and had had to sack him, and then helped him get back on his feet again in his own business.)

Every Christmas we would drive down from Toronto to stay with my grandparents for Christmas. They had a bedroom to which they had converted the attic, at the very top of the house. And Ted and I slept there, on army cots with air mattresses.

We were very near to the air. Very near to the outside. I could almost hear the snowflakes hitting the roof above my head.

And then, one Christmas Eve, in the attic, trying to sleep, I heard “knock, knock” above my head!

“Ted!” I said. “Wake up! Did you hear that?”

It was most definitely the knock that a reindeer hoof makes on an attic roof. I climbed from my cot and rushed to the small window to see if I could see the sleigh.

“Shh!” scolded Ted. “What are you doing? Do you want to spoil Christmas?”

Of course he was right. I had just about ruined it already with my big mouth and my clumsy meanderings. I went straight back to bed and - well, of course I didn’t sleep. I *pretended* to sleep. Santa may know if I’ve been bad or good all year but I was counting on his preoccupation with the night’s work to not notice that I wasn’t asleep.

Many years later I worked it out. I can’t remember how I did it. I overheard my mother talking to someone. I did the math. I didn’t so much ask my parents as go into the living room, stand in front of Mom on the couch and Dad in the Dad chair, and tell them that I now knew that Santa Claus did not exist.

I was profoundly sad.

It took me several more years to realize that I had made a mistake in my calculations. It was a combination of meeting a girl at a CPR course in the dead of winter, and holding hands while skating, and overcoming nearly insurmountable odds, after letting go of that hand for a whole year, finding it again, starting a family, and losing a lot of sleep on Christmas Eves - some assembly required - and Christmas mornings - “It’s five o’clock, Dad! Wake up! It’s Christmas!” - and finally, remembering that *I had actually heard rein-deers’ hooves!* - that I realized the truth.

I am Santa Claus.

And I am still 41.