

The Most Terrible Time of the Year

Call me a Grinch, maybe the Grinch. I proudly display the Twelve Terrors of Christmas, by John Updike, on an end table each holiday season, and I loved John Grisham's book, "Skipping Christmas". I take David Sedaris seriously with his title Holidays on Ice, and think any kind of stiff drink splashed over one of those giant spherical ice cubes just makes everything better this time of year. It was just last year, after succumbing to the extra layer of commercial nonsense known as The Elf on the Shelf, that my husband and I came up with a new seasonal cocktail, Pyrat on the Shelf, made with top shelf Caribbean rum, to take the sting off of Christmas. I fantasize about going snorkeling in the Caribbean one year. I find the Whos in Who-ville irritating. I, like Charlie Brown, seek psychiatric help over Christmas.

This year, December 2023, really is the most terrible of the most terrible times of the year, because I saw my daughter lose a piece of her childhood, like a piece of the continental shelf breaking off an already vulnerable part of the US. Perhaps Florida. Or Long Island. A part of my already vulnerably tween cracked away. Another part of childhood broken, gone.

And it's my fault. It's all my fault. Was it What I said? Or just my whole generally grinch-y self? It all started, actually, with the tooth fairy last month.

Breakfast time on a weekday morning. My daughter comes into the kitchen, announces that the tooth fairy hasn't come yet, that her brother's tooth is still under his pillow, that he's now taking a bath, and she's assured him the tooth fairy will come later in the morning. After all, sometimes she's just late. I shoot my husband a look, and announce loudly to him that the tooth fairy was late. My daughter picks up on my accusatory tone. My husband flies out of the kitchen

and into our room, and then up the stairs. My daughter says she's going to follow him, to see what he's doing, a look of sly satisfaction spread across her face. I ask her to please stay in the kitchen. She keeps up that sly look, slurping her cereal.

“Mommy, are you and Daddy the tooth fairy?” She asks, smiling. She is triumphant! She's figured it out.

“Yes,” I say proudly, happy to finally take credit for my work and stop attributing it to a mythical figure. “But don't tell your brother! It's important for him to still believe in the magic.”

In my mind, Santa is just a few logical steps from the tooth fairy. But I realized last night for my daughter, Santa is the pinnacle of magic, the summit, and attention ladies and gentleman, it has been lopped off. My daughter's North Star of childhood has been wiped out, and the compass is spinning wildly. Nothing makes sense anymore.

Last night, during a dinner with extended family, I noticed my daughter hovering near me as I was clearing the table. I asked if everything was OK, but I had a sneaking turbulent suspicion that her distant, sad expression had something to do with what I had been saying about the elf at the adults table. When someone said, “shhhhh! June's right there.” And I shrugged, boasting about she already knew the tooth fairy wasn't real so I wasn't so concerned.

And then she looked at me, her beautiful child-like face and cheeks, tears glistening in her eyes, a mask of bewilderment in her face.

“I heard you say that you were — amazed — by the things — that — other parents — do — to set up their elves.”

A pit in my stomach begins to grow, like a black hole. I know where this is going. The girl, who I thought was sophisticated and would soon be over all magical creatures, was instead still a child with an innocent belief I ruined.

As if on cue, the song in the Christmas playlist blaring through the house at this very moment is Grandma Just Got Run Over by a Reindeer. Really, Spotify? This is not the time!

My daughter's arrested voice kept going, in sputters. "And then — in the song — it says —" and she looked up at me, black holes of sadness and loss sucking me in, "You — may— say — there's —"

I know where she's going, and like a car spinning out on an icy road, there is nothing I can do.

"— no—such thing —" she's gasping now, "as Santa — but as for me — and — Grandma — we — believe." Her eyes are hidden now behind an ocean of tears, about to overflow and run down her face.

I have absolutely no idea what to say. I decide that saying nothing is the way to go. I wrap my arm around her, hold her. She puts her head up against my shoulder, and cries, silently, softly, while extended family members help themselves to more eggplant and fried pork and Prosecco.

There is nothing I can say. I'm terrified to utter even a single word. because each word will bring us closer to the culmination I am dreading — when she looks up at me with those mournful eyes and asks is Santa real? This cannot happen. We cannot go there.

Not tonight. One day, but please, not tonight.

I am saved by my writing. I need to get upstairs and put in my two hours. The near-daily two hours I have been doing for the past 6 months, that doesn't seem like a lot but is, and sometimes has to happen at night after a family dinner, when I'd rather just finish off 2 more glasses of Prosecco and watch TV, but instead I go upstairs. I tell her she can come up and interrupt me at any time. She doesn't.

I begin the two hours a day which have achieved miracles. Miracles like finishing my novel, and getting an agent. And, a Christmas miracle, by pushing off the emergent conversation about Santa's existence for another day.