

AN INTERVIEW WITH SANTA AND OTHER CHRISTMAS TREATS



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STOCKBRIDGE, GA

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Heavy snowflakes drift down into the valley nestled between the shoulders of the North Georgia mountains and swirl over the little town of Archer. The city is abuzz as people cross and re-cross the town square seeking the perfect gift for a cherished loved one. A few enter the run-down movie theater where the old marquee announces that *It's a Wonderful Life* is playing again this year.

A large crowd gathers around the 50-foot tree in the center of the plaza. Many stand mesmerized by the rainbow of lights encircling its huge frame. The lights dance joyfully in a Yuletide ballet amidst the gold and silver baubles twinkling in the tree's branches. Atop the great fir sits an angel, her raven

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hair waving in the winter breeze as she blows a golden horn. Every year her presence proclaims that the day of Christ's birth is near at hand.

Unfortunately, Johnny Brown, star reporter for *The Archer Daily Gazette*, finds little joy in the beautiful winter scene before him. He looks down from his office at all the pre-Christmas activities, shaking his head in disgust. He spins in his chair and throws his pen across the room, hearing a satisfying ping and clatter as it bounces off the water cooler and falls to the floor. He stares at the portrait of himself on his desk, taken last year while receiving the "Journalist of the Year" Award.

Even then he'd felt restless. Although he has a host of certificates and trophies lining his walls, something is missing. Discontentment gnaws at him constantly, and no matter what he does, he can't seem to break free from its grip.

Johnny picks up the picture of his mother being honored by the town for the success of her last book. In it, she poses tall and elegant in her royal blue evening gown. His admiration and respect for her grows each time he thinks of all she accomplished in her short lifetime. After she died, he promised himself that one day he'd do something special for her—something to make her proud and prove to her, as well as himself, that he's more than just a small-

time reporter. But it's been eight years since her death, and Johnny's hopes and dreams had faded long ago.

Johnny once had a promising future ahead of him. He was a straight-A student in high school, and was editor of the newspaper in his junior and senior years. He'd planned to leave Archer after graduation and attend one of the larger universities near Atlanta. But after his mother's death, he decided to stay in town to be near his sister. So instead he went to Archer Community College. He graduated from the local school, having won numerous awards and again serving as editor of the school newspaper.

He'd expected job offers to roll in from all over the country after graduation, but his lofty goals were soon dashed. He settled for a job at the local paper, where he was content for a while. But for the last year or so, the feeling of discontent has grown within him, and every day he feels more like an animal trapped in a cage.

He gets up and paces in front of his desk. He runs his fingers through his hair as he tries to think of some way to break out of his funk. If only I can get one big break, he tells himself. A story so big that everyone will sit up and take notice!

Johnny suddenly sweeps his arm across his desk, knocking a stack of papers onto the floor. He squeezes

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his eyes shut and fights to regain control of himself. He takes a few deep breaths, then stoops to clean up his mess. He pauses when he recognizes the sweet scent of lilac drifting into the room.

"You okay, Johnny?" someone says from the doorway.

"I'm fine," Johnny replies, not bothering to look up. "Just a little frustrated, that's all."

"Why?" Kathy asks as she eases into the room and kneels beside him. Her blue-white hair has a faint neon quality in the dimness, and the red rims of her rectangular glasses are in marked contrast to her pale, puffy-cheeked face. Johnny has to breathe through his mouth to keep from being overwhelmed by her pungent perfume. He often wonders if the old woman actually wallows in the stuff all night, or perhaps even drinks it.

"I don't know Kathy," Johnny replies. "I guess I feel like a failure. I mean, I want to do a truly important story, you know?"

"Nonsense!" Kathy shouts, her voice cracking like an adolescent boy's. "You've done plenty of important stories! Like the one about Mr. Clayborne's five-legged mule, or how about the mystery of the disappearing underwear—"

"Actually," Johnny says, "I mean a story that's made a difference."

"The underwear story did make a difference Johnny," Kathy replies. "After all, I was afraid to hang my underpants on the clothesline for months—"

"I know, but—"

"And who would've believed that it was old Mr. Clayborne all the time! You'd think a man with a five-legged mule would have better things to do—"

"Kathy," Johnny says in exasperation. "You're right, of course. I don't know what I was thinking. I feel so much better now. Thanks."

"That's okay, sweetie," the woman replies as she pats his cheek. "Just glad I could help. I'd help with these papers too, but I've got to go type up something for Mr. Barlowe. He sent me to tell you he wants to see you in his office right away."

Johnny sighs. "Tell him I'll be there in a minute."

"Will do," Kathy says as she stands and hurries out of the door.

Johnny collects the scattered papers. While trying to put them in some semblance of order, his eye falls on one page in particular. It's a full-page Christmas ad he'd written the copy for last week. He stares at it as if only now seeing it for the first time.

It's an illustration of a winter night. A lush forest covers the bottom of the drawing, so lifelike that Johnny can almost smell the comforting fragrance of pine. Snowcapped mountains rise up behind the trees

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to touch the starry sky, and the moon shines down with its pale, wintry light.

In the foreground are eight little reindeer streaking across the sky with a magical sleigh in tow. In the back of the sleigh rests a huge red sack whose sides are bulging and top overflowing with its stash of toys. Driving the sleigh is a rotund little man wearing a bright red suit. His gaudy outfit is trimmed in white fur at the hems of his pants and the collar and cuffs of his coat. He wears large black boots and a broad leather belt which futilely attempt to reign in his big, bouncing belly. His cap is also trimmed in the cotton-like fur; at its tip is a fluffy white ball flapping merrily in the breeze. Although the man's face is obscured beneath a curly white beard, it's still his most striking feature.

His ruddy cheeks and tiny nose suggest a youthful spirit despite the wealth of years implied by his long white hair. The corners of his mouth are turned up in a mischievous grin like a child who's just gotten away with some prank. Tiny creases at the corners of his eyes indicate the toll his long life has taken upon him, yet a bright flame still burns in the depths of his eyes.

As Johnny gazes at this man, he feels as though he's just been struck by a ton of bricks. Here's a man with a great story to tell. A man loved and respected

by everyone. A man whose story would captivate the world!

Johnny leaps out of his chair and dances until banging his knee against his metal desk. Despite the pain, a tiny smile crosses his lips. He envisions his name up in lights, and it's a very sweet vision indeed.

He limps over to his chair and sits down. Retrieving his appointment book from his desk drawer, he flips to December 24, exactly one week away. He grabs a pen and writes: "Interview Santa Claus."

Johnny grins as he leans back and puts his hands behind his head.



"You're going to do what?" asks Lloyd Barlowe, editor-in-chief of *The Archer Daily Gazette*, as he sits behind his desk. Shock mars his lean face. "Are you insane?"

"Not at all, Mr. Barlowe. I'll wait for Santa on my sister's rooftop, and when he shows up, I'll interview him. Simple as that." Johnny smiles at his boss, ignoring the sinking feeling growing in the pit of his stomach. He hates facing his boss when he's in a combative mood. Not only is the man a shrewd debater, but Johnny invariably finds Barlowe's high-

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pitched nasal voice disturbing. Also, watching that sole lock of hair dangle in the middle of his balding forehead is terribly annoying.

“Simple as that, huh?” says Mr. Barlowe. “Well, aren’t you the little genius? Tell me, Mr. Brown, what makes you think that Santa will even consent to do an interview with , of all people?”

Johnny’s eyes shift nervously as he searches for a reply.

Why would Santa give me an interview after all, he wondered, when he could easily get Barbara Walters, or Tom Snyder, or any number of top-flight reporters to do an exclusive whenever he wanted?

“Er,” Johnny stammers. “Because...well...I mean, why wouldn’t he, sir? Santa likes to make dreams come true, right? So maybe he’ll admire my initiative and help make mine come true.”

Unable to come up with a decent argument to counter such a simple point, Barlowe throws up his hands.

“Okay, Brown, go ahead and try it. But just make sure Santa knows that I had nothing to do with it. I don’t intend to find coal in my stocking on Christmas morning.”

Johnny’s so happy he nearly kisses Barlowe, but fortunately thinks better of.

"Thank you, Mr. Barlowe!" Johnny cries. "You'll see! I'll make both of us famous. Just watch."

"Yeah, sure," Mr. Barlowe says with a dismissive wave. "But right now I have another story for you. An old woman on the south side of town died this morning, and the neighbors are worried about her missing pet pig." Barlowe leans over a note on his desk. "The pig was reportedly last seen running into the woods wearing a Santa suit..."



Johnny checks the contents of his knapsack for the fifth time: flashlight, pens, pencils, paper, tape recorder, camera, extra tapes, extra batteries, backup flashlight, and of course, cookies and milk for Santa.

Yep, all set.

He zips the bag closed and slings it over his shoulder. He snatches up his keys from the kitchen counter and leaves his apartment. Climbing into his pride and joy, a 1965 Candy-apple Red Ford Mustang, he speeds out of the parking lot.

The temperature's dropping, and it's beginning to snow. He turns on the radio and whistles along to The Temptations' rendition of *Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. He looks at the snowflakes as they streak past and sighs. Gonna be a beautiful Christmas

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night...unless you plan to spend most of it on a roof, that is.

As Johnny comes out of a winding curve in the road, a large red object runs out of the trees and stops right in front of him. He slams on brakes and swerves into the oncoming lane, barely missing the creature that stands there, frozen with fear. Johnny regains control of the car and pulls over to the side of the road. He jumps out and walks back to see if the animal is okay.

A large pig wearing a tattered Santa suit stands before him. Although obviously frightened, the pig seems friendly enough. As it shivers in the cold, Johnny almost hears its thoughts pleading for help. Obviously, Johnny thinks, this is the missing pig I did the story on the other day.

“Unless there are two of you running around,” he says aloud. What’s his name? Oh yeah, Piglaus, he recalls with a roll of his eyes.

After struggling with the portly swine, he manages to get him into the car. As Johnny climbs in, he considers taking the pig home. Then he remembers that the owner is dead and that the neighbors, though concerned about the missing pig, had seemed none too eager to offer him a new home.

“Well,” Johnny says, staring down at Piglaus, “looks like it’s just you and me for a while, my friend.”

The pig looks unimpressed, but appears grateful nonetheless. He snuggles into the seat, immediately beginning to snore. Johnny tries not to think about the cleaning bill for his white leather interior as he pulls back onto the roadway.



Shouts of “Uncle Johnny” echo throughout the yard as Johnny’s nieces and nephew warmly greet him. He notes that seven-year old Mary’s growing like a weed, and will surely be tall like her grandmother. Five-year old Thomas is a studious sort who wears thick, black-rimmed glasses which positively screams, “Hey, I’m a nerd! Beat me up please!” Two and a half year old Amy reminds him very much of her mother—his sister—at that age. Easily excitable and always hyper, Amy usually has plenty to say. And although she can’t talk very well yet, sometimes what she has to say is truly insightful.

“Unkle Jonny, I went poddy today!”

And sometimes, it isn’t.

Johnny bends down and picks up the bouncing toddler. He smiles as she squeezes his neck.

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"That's great, Honey! You're getting to be a big girl."

"Okay kids," calls their mother as she strolls across the yard toward them. "Uncle Johnny's got work to do. Run along and get ready for bed. Santa will be here soon."

"Wait," Johnny says as the kids turn toward the house. "I have a friend here who needs a little love and care. Think you might like to help?"

Johnny walks over and opens the passenger door of his car. Piglaus looks up at him questioningly. Johnny waits briefly, then remembers that pigs aren't noted for their climbing ability. He lifts the pig, sure that he hears at least three of his vertebrae snap, and sets him on the ground. The kids immediately swarm over Piglaus until their mother suggests they take the pig to the barn. But the children ignore her and instead lead Piglaus into the house.

No doubt, Johnny thinks, to spend the night in front of a warm fire, while I spend it up on the cold, lonely roof. It's the first time Johnny's ever felt envious of a pig, and he hopes it's the last.

Johnny turns to face Laurie, who looks at him in that loving, yet searching way she has.

"What's up, Sis?"

"I'm fine, Johnny," she says as she embraces him. "But what's troubling you?"

“Straight to the point, as always, huh?” Johnny laughs.

“Yep,” she replies with a grin.

“Well,” Johnny says, “since you’re the mind reader, why don’t you tell me?”

“I don’t need to read your mind Johnny, when your face is an open book.” She cocks her head to the side, her short, sandy hair bouncing. “How many times have I told you that you have nothing to prove? You’ll always be a success as far as Mom, and everyone else, is concerned, even if you’re never world renowned.”

“A part of me knows that Sis, but I just can’t help it. It keeps gnawing at me.”

Laurie shrugs. “So, do you really think Santa will talk to you? He is pretty busy tonight, you know?”

“Can’t hurt to ask, can it?”

“Not if you enjoy having a stocking full of coal,” Laurie laughs as she turns toward the house. “Come on and get warm by the fire before you go to work, Mr. Pulitzer Prize.”



Johnny sits on the roof gazing out over his sister’s farm. It’s a beautiful sight to behold, like a living postcard. The clouds have broken, and the moon

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provides enough light to make out the features of the land.

The barn is to his left, and he can vaguely catch a whiff of the horses that are stirring around inside. He even catches a stray whinny escaping from them now and then. Probably complaining about the cold too, he thinks with a smile.

The driveway winds around the small lake to his right and continues until meeting the tree-lined highway. A forest of pines spreads out behind the house, reminding Johnny of the Christmas ad back in his office. His pulse quickens as he imagines Santa swooping down over the trees with his sleigh full of toys.

Johnny wraps a wool blanket around his shoulders and presses his back more firmly against the chimney. He braces his feet to keep from sliding off the icy roof. To take his mind off the cold, he thinks of the fame about to come his way.

He considers all the personal appearances he'll soon make: Leno, Letterman, Oprah, Ellen, maybe even Springer. Springer? Now that'd be an interesting show. He envisions the probable topic: "Women Who've Slept With Santa, and the Men Who Still Love Them." He laughs quietly to himself as he leans back. Eventually his eyelids grow heavy and he closes his eyes for a brief nap....



Johnny nearly slides off the roof when he awakes with a start. He leaps to his feet, totally disoriented. Clutching the chimney for support, he struggles to regain his balance as well as his wits. He soon remembers where he is, becoming painfully aware of his stiff and aching joints. Well, at least it's morning, he thinks. Then he recalls why he's on the roof in the first place.

He scrambles down the ladder and charges around the house, nearly crashing into Laurie as she's rounding the corner.

"Johnny! You nearly scared me to death! Are you all right?"

"Did...Santa...come..." he gasps between anxious breaths.

"Of course he did, silly! The kids are making a mess of the den right now. There's a present waiting for you too, if my little rugrats haven't gotten to it first."

"Probably just a lump of coal," Johnny mutters with slumping shoulders and a sinking heart. He follows Laurie into the house.

He discovers that the den truly is a wreck. Very little floor space is left exposed. Discarded toys,

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clothes, boxes, and torn wrapping paper are strewn all over, as if it's just been struck by a tornado.

The three tiny cyclones sprawl near the family's Christmas tree. Johnny looks down on their angelic faces and imagines the wondrous dreams probably playing in their minds. He remembers how he'd felt at that age, and prays that they never lose faith in their dreams like he has.

"I put your gift over in the corner Johnny, so hopefully the kids didn't open it by mistake."

Johnny kneels. He peers behind the tree, spotting a small silver box with a card attached.

Oh great! Santa's so angry with me that he didn't even leave me a decent-sized lump of coal.

Johnny plops down on the overstuffed couch. He turns to his right, coming nose to nose with Piglaus. The pig's wearing a heavy green sweater with his name stitched on the side.

"At least Santa likes you," Johnny says to the pig as he pats him on the head.

Johnny opens the card first. Pushing the nosy pig aside, he reads:

Dear Johnny:

So, you thought catching up with Old Santa was a good idea, huh? Well, I admire your initiative, but

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frankly, I get so many offers for interviews each year, it's quite overwhelming. Oprah, Barbara, Leno, and so many more I can't even count. Springer even asked me once, but I just don't have the time. You have no idea how hard it is to maintain a database of good kids, while constantly weeding out the bad ones. And don't get me started on the contract negotiations with all the toy manufacturers. And of course, I have to spend quality time with Mrs. Claus. I'm lucky to get a month's vacation in the Caribbean each year.

Anyway, you see how precious my time is, Johnny, so I'm afraid I just can't grant you that interview right now. But don't ever give up your dreams! Without dreams, we would all be nothing, and you are definitely not destined to be nothing!

So, take care, stay strong, and be safe. I hope my gift makes up for not granting your wish this year. Oh, and please do something about that snoring problem of yours. The reindeer were in an awful mood after having to listen to you for half-an-hour while I was inside the house.

Merry Christmas!

*Love,
Santa*

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“Well? What did Santa say?” demands Laurie as she cranes her neck, trying to peer over Johnny’s shoulder. He passes her the note, then opens the small box. Inside is the most beautifully crafted snowglobe he’s ever seen, containing a complete reproduction of the Archer Town Square. There are even little people standing around the great tree looking up at the tiny angel who sits atop it blowing her golden horn.

Johnny is mesmerized by the gift. As he leans closer, he sees something that at first startles him, but then causes him to break into a fit of laughter.

“What is it, Johnny?” Laurie asks. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, Sis,” he gasps between chuckles. “I’m fine. In fact, I think I’m better than I’ve been in a long, long time.” He smiles as he hands the snowglobe to Laurie.

Mary, Thomas, Amy, and the pig, all gather around the object. They stare at it in wonder and delight for several moments. Then, all of them suddenly gasp in surprise.

On one side of the tiny town square is the old movie theater, recreated in complete detail, right down to the cracked sidewalk. A tall woman wearing a royal blue evening gown stands before it, looking up at the shabby marquee above. The bright, flashing words on the marquee look new, and as Laurie reads them, she too begins to laugh.

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“Well, you got your wish, eh Johnny?”

“Yeah,” Johnny replies. “I guess I did.” He slips his arm around her as he reads the marquee again.

“Johnny Brown, World Renowned Reporter” it says.

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