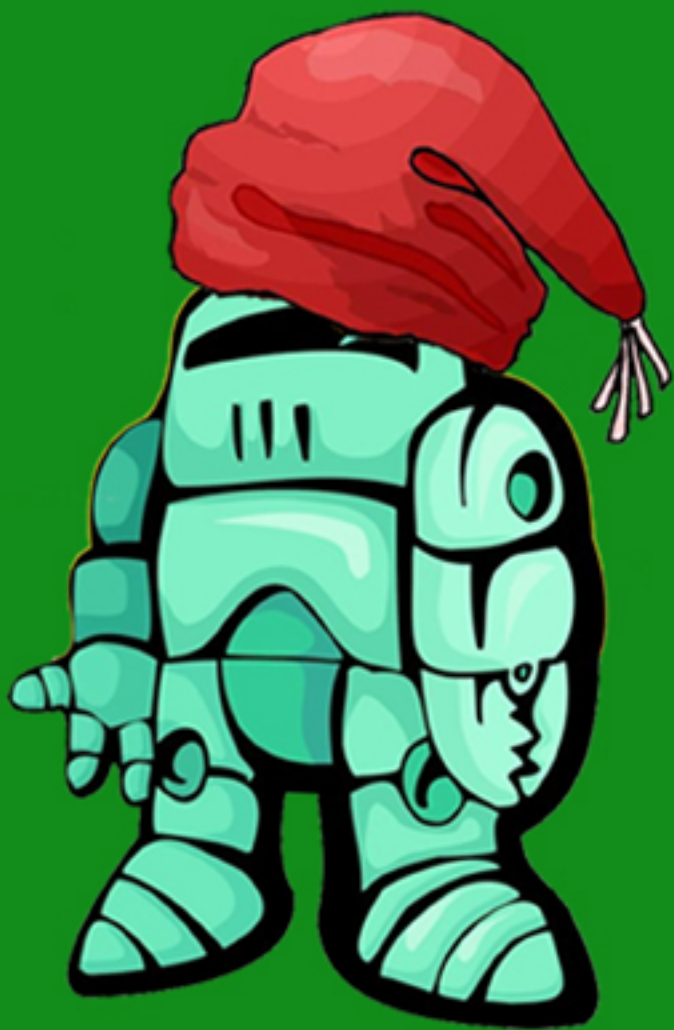


Andrew Breslin



A CLAUS
TO REMEMBER

2,147 sheep had already hopped the fence by the time I finally stopped counting, and I was no closer to sleep than when the first of the woolly mammals had made the leap. At around a thousand or so, I had them jumping backwards, just to relieve the monotony. Some of them started doing little sommersaults and assorted feats of ovine acrobatics by 1,500, but this proved no more soporific. And then the air filled with terrified bleats at the approach of the dreaded Deathstalker robot, who annihilated the fence with one well placed proton-blast, dispersing the flock and destroying all hope of sleep.

I'd crafted my letter to Santa with more attention to detail than most air traffic controllers exercise, phrasing each request with precisely measured doses of humility and supplication. I had repeatedly drawn attention to my renunciation of all things naughty, and my enthusiastic efforts to embrace the



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light of niceness. The Deathstalker robot was essentially a given, for I'd put it at the very top of the list, in dark black magic marker, in the handwritten equivalent of bold 36 point type. A soccer ball was very likely to be amongst the booty. A new bike was a distinct possibility. A Gamemaster video game system was not out of the question. My younger brother Danny and I coordinated our lists carefully. Christmas was not something to be entered into lightly. It was a serious business on which we began work as early as July. A casual approach could have lost us our competitive edge with the other neighborhood children.

We left some cookies and milk right there beneath the tree. The standard bribe. They were good, too. Mom baked them, and I assisted by taste testing and providing expert feedback. Together we had crafted sublime confectionery delight. If Santa were to waver on any particular item, these would surely push him right over the edge.

Confident that we'd done everything in our power to squeeze all we could out of St. Nick, we left Mom and Dad sitting in front of the fireplace. I refused to go to bed until I received a solemn promise that the fire would be sufficiently extinguished prior to the arrival of the North Pole denizens, and that Mom and Dad would soon be off to bed themselves. I'd heard that Santa was a solitary and somewhat paranoid creature who would not leave presents if

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observed. My conditions met, I brought Danny with me and thus began the long ordeal of tossing, turning, and the counting of a seemingly endless stream of sheep in agonized anticipation of the great bounty the morning would bring. We finally drifted off, with no assistance from the sheep.

I was up with the dawn, ready to reap the rewards of having abjured naughtiness to the very best of my abilities. I shook Danny roughly and he too shot up out of bed. At the age of six and eight, the body manufacturers internally secreted crystal methamphetamine, clean and uncut. We were wired and ready to seize the day.

We thundered down the steps with all the subtlety and grace of drunken brontosaurus-es. I envisioned savagely tearing into wrapping paper. I pictured myself dumping that big stocking upside down and watching the knickknacks and bonbons pour out. The Deathstalker robot was as good as in my hands, its particle cannons ready to pulverize opponents. Oh the carnage! Paradise awaited. I invaded the living room with a blood-curdling shriek of delight, echoed instantly by Danny, true to younger brother form.

And there to our wondering eyes did appear . . . nothing. Nothing but Mom and Dad asleep on the couch. Well, they were sleeping prior to our blood-curdling shrieks of delight, which were clearly premature. They arose and boggled. Danny and I stared in dis-



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belief. Great heaping piles of toys were conspicuously absent. Stockings, hung by the chimney with care, as per the requisite ritual, remained there, devoid of the treats with which they should have been filled. No video game. No soccer ball. No Deathstalker robot. Nothing. Just a pair of startled parents, and we could have them anytime.

Danny started to cry.

“That bast—” I began to shout, but Mom miraculously shook off enough sleep to clap her palm over my mouth, ending any aspersions I would cast on Santa’s parentage.

Dad began to comfort Danny. I remained indignant. That corpulent elf had ripped us off. I was never an angel, but I certainly had been no naughtier this year than I’d been in years previous when I had really cleaned up at Yuletide. There was no consistency!

What really gnawed at me was that I could have been thoroughly naughty all year, and surely would have been had I known this was to come. I had been nice all year for nothing! I wanted to raise my voice to the heavens and scream, “I was good, for goodness sake!” A quick examination of the stockings revealed no coal, traditionally an indication of one’s unworthiness of toys due to naughty behavior. With no such sign given, and none warranted, Santa’s actions were inexplicable and outrageously unfair.

Santa was said to make a list and check it twice. *Twice*, mind you, which should elimi-

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nate any such oversights. I began to doubt if he even checked it once, and thought perhaps he had some incompetent elf like Dopey check it out. I suggested this to Danny who told me that Dopey was a dwarf, not an elf, but I remained suspicious.

The wheels in my head spun wildly, seeking explanation, or even better, blame. I glowered disapprovingly at my parents. Clearly, they had never gone to bed and their presence must have frightened the reportedly neurotic Santa. I put forth this theory, indeed accused them directly, but Mom and Dad just stammered.

It was then I noticed that the cookies and milk were gone.

I screamed in righteous indignation, “Not only did that red-suited sack of blubber leave us nothing, he stuffed his fat face with those cookies Mom and I made!”

This was inexcusable. I started ranting and raving, calling Santa every dirty word I’d ever heard my father use in anger, and inventing a few of my own that had an especially profane ring to them. Meanwhile, Danny started crying again, suspecting that perhaps naughtiness on his behalf was the explanation. I pointed out the absence of coal in the stockings as a dead giveaway to the contrary, and he slowly stopped crying and joined me in the really-pissed-off-at-Santa camp.

Mom tried to calm us down, and begged for us to refrain from our streams of curses for Father Christmas, insisting that some unfore-



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seen circumstance must have arisen. Incredulous, I asked for a possible explanation. For God's sake! The man only had to work one night a year! The elves made the toys, which had to be the tough part. Santa was just a courier. If he couldn't get a simple delivery right, he should start looking for a new job. The tooth fairy had never missed an appointment, and she was presumably on call 365 days a year.

"Maybe he had to take care of some emergency," Mom suggested generously.

"Hah!" I replied. "If it was such an emergency, why did he have time to eat the cookies and drink the milk?" I demanded. Mom had no rebuttal.

"Didn't you even see him, Mom?" I asked, "You were right here for Pete's sake!"

"No, we, um . . . we were asleep," she stammered.

"The guy's a tub of lard! He came down a chimney right in front of you! How could you miss it?"

Dad interjected, "Santa's magic, son. If he doesn't want to be heard, he won't be."

Danny broke his long silence. "If Santa is magic, then why couldn't he bring us toys and fix his 'mergency at the same time?"

Mom and Dad could not withstand the inscrutable logic and fury of an eight and six-year-old scorned. They had to concede that Santa had balked in his duties. That he had undeservedly taken milk and cookies, accept-

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ing an implied contract to deliver toys, but had not fulfilled his end of the bargain. He deserved nothing less than to be hunted down and stripped of his toys as well as his unearned reputation as a magnanimous holiday spirit.

It was a terrible Christmas. A thick gloom hung over the house all day, dousing all efforts by Mom and Dad to instill us with some sense of holiday cheer. Dad seemed hell-bent on turning this tragedy into some ridiculous character-building experience. Much was said about the true meaning of Christmas having nothing to do with getting presents. This was without any doubt the stupidest thing I'd ever heard, and I wondered exactly what the hell they were putting in their eggnog.

Mom persisted. "Now haven't you ever heard that it is more blessed to give than to receive?" she asked hopefully.

"But we did give!" I argued. "We gave cookies and milk and we got nothing! Nothing! What's the world coming to? The Easter bunny has always come through, and he's just a freakin' *rabbit!* He doesn't even have any elves or a sleigh with flying reindeer or anything! But he always manages! And Santa took the milk and cookies! He's obviously more interested in receiving than giving!" I concluded angrily.

"Well," Mom stated in exhaustion "All I can say is you mustn't lose faith in Santa. He's got



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a tough job and he means well. Sometimes things happen which are beyond his control, but I am sure he'll come through."

I was thoroughly disillusioned and miserable. My friends began calling in the afternoon to tell me all about the presents Santa had brought them. He hadn't missed another house, not a one. Except for the Jewish kids, whom he always skipped. I never quite understood that and thought perhaps he was an anti-Semite or something, but Mom assured me that it was for some other reason. When pressed for a more detailed answer she was always vague and told me that I would understand when I was older. She said the same thing when I asked where babies came from, so I figured the two processes were somehow related but couldn't fathom how.

The Jewish kids all got toys nonetheless, and got them earlier, so it didn't really matter. If I am not mistaken, their parents bought them their toys. It was fortunate that we had Santa, for there was no way my folks could ever afford to buy me all the stuff I usually got.

Uncle Tony, Aunt Deborah, and my cousins Suzie and Kara came over for dinner, as they did every Christmas, bringing with them the choicest selections of the horde that the fickle Mr. Kringle had brought. When Suzie heard Santa had blacklisted us for undisclosed reasons, she took the opportunity to offer the theory that Danny and I were the naughtiest kids in all of North America.

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She postulated that the only reason he didn't leave any coal was that Santa was wise enough not to give a pair of mischievous imps such as ourselves anything combustible.

She brought her most prized new gift, a doll the chief functional feature of which was that it could soil itself. I was appalled. It was only a few years ago that Danny had graduated from diapers, and here Suzie was getting dolls that needed changing. There's progress for you.

When Susie wasn't looking, Danny grabbed the doll and handed it off to me, and I pitched the incontinent little monster into the fireplace. It went up in a cascade of crackles and a beautiful Technicolor orgy of burning plastic polymers. The smell was an exciting new experience. Susie exploded in tears, but I felt no remorse. I was out a Deathstalker robot, and could not weep for a pissing baby. At this point, good behavior was pointless. I was eager to catch up on a year's worth of repressed naughtiness.

This earned me harsh admonishment and I was marched immediately off to my room. Danny, who'd assisted with the minor arson, joined me in my exile. We were up late again, this time kept awake not by anticipation but by burning anger and a painful sense of injustice. The sickening stench of Wendy Wetums' pyrotechnic exit filled the house and it would be difficult to sleep in any event until it aired out. We put a picture of Santa on our dartboard and took turns skewering him.



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This vicarious vengeance was only briefly satisfying. Ironically, Santa had brought the dartboard for me the year before, but my gratitude for that had long since expired. *Oh Santa! Oh Santa! Why hast thou forsaken me?* I asked silently as I drifted off to bed, eyes filled with the bitterest tears.

I slept late the next morning, there being little incentive to get out of bed. I was bored with all the toys I had, after all. Danny was still asleep when I finally emerged, and I didn't bother to wake him. Let the kid dream of better times. I moped my way downstairs without enthusiasm and was heading toward the kitchen to prepare some oatmeal when I beheld a miraculous and beautiful sight. The living room was filled with toys. The Deathstalker robot stood proudly in the center, a big red bow perched incongruously atop his gleaming chrome head. Around him dozens of other toys assembled like a small and colorful army. I stared in disbelief for a few moments before screaming ecstatically and diving in, tearing open wrapping paper, dumping out stockings and whooping it up in unabashed glee.

Soon, Mom, Dad, and Danny emerged. Danny's eyes lit up as he saw me wading through the ocean of toys and he joined in the rapture. Dad produced a small piece of paper from somewhere and insisted on our attention.

"Boys, it looks like Santa left a note," he said, then read aloud, "I'm so sorry, but I

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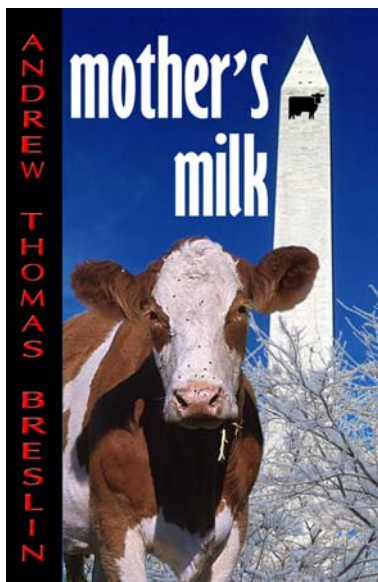
didn't realize until the last minute that I had forgotten some of your toys, so I had to go back to the North Pole. I hope you will enjoy them. I'm a little disappointed about that incident with your cousin. The elves worked hard on that doll! I expect you to apologize and buy her a new one with your allowance money if you want to get any presents next year. I'm only looking the other way right now because I know I let you down. The cookies and milk were quite delicious, by the way, better even than Mrs. Claus's, but please don't repeat that to her. Merry Christmas. Your pal, Santa.”

I was thoroughly ashamed that I'd sullied Santa's good name and reputation. Sorry that I had ever doubted him, I petitioned whoever was listening above to forgive me for besmirching the honor of such a munificent benefactor. My guilty thoughts vanished as I removed the ribbons from the Deathstalker robot, and was too overjoyed for any regrets.

Danny and I played with our new presents until it was time for bed. Satisfied and exhausted, we fell asleep easily, dreaming of toys and happiness. Some say virtue is its own reward, but I'll take a Deathstalker robot over virtue any day of the week. As I faded into unconsciousness, I vowed never to lose my faith in Santa Claus and not to be naughty ever again.



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