

# Christmas

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Rated: PG

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Summary: On Christmas Eve, Mark Johnson sits down with his family to tell a tale of adventure and magic which features a different sort of hero.

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Mr. Johnson was getting excited, and given the festive time of year his family knew what that meant. Rather than putting it off, because he wouldn't settle down until the tradition was satisfied, they all gathered in the living room so he could tell his story of how, one Christmas Eve, he was rescued by Santa Claus.

Mark Johnson looked over his children, now nearing their teen years, and his lovely wife, and silently gave thanks that he was here to see it. Then he began to tell his story. "Twas the night before Christmas—"

The kids rolled their eyes. That was a bad way to start any story. On top of which they heard this story every year (and weren't about to admit they looked forward to it).

"And I was far from home," continued Mr. Johnson, not even noticing the motion of their eyes. "I was eager to get home for the Christmas holiday. I was driving through rural Montana and I decided to take a shortcut, that in hindsight was actually a long cut. There was a road marked on the map that would cut off some distance. It was marked as good weather only but even though it was December I thought the roads looked good and the weather fine. I had lots of gas and... I was eager to get home. So I took it."

"You'd think the fact that I was the only one taking it would have given me a hint, but it didn't. Soon I was in literally the middle of nowhere. I started up a little hill and my car slowed, so I pushed harder on the gas. Whereupon I went even slower so I pushed harder. And I went still slower so I put my foot to the floor... and came to a complete stop." He didn't feel it necessary to admit how many seconds he'd sat there with his foot to the floor before realizing this meant his car had broken down.

"I knew this wasn't good and I then made it worse. I got out and started walking. Now, in my defense, no one knew I was there and was going to come looking for me, but leaving the safety of the car, that far from civilization, in winter, was a bad idea.

"I'd gone about two miles, was feeling winded, and very cold, when I managed to fall down the embankment AND break my leg. I'm still not sure which came first. I was laying at the bottom of the ditch, wondering which caused which and the only thing I could think to do was yell for help."

"The echoes of my yells came back... and it was eerily quiet in between. And then the first silent snowflake landed..."

"I was feeling pretty sorry for myself, figuring I'd never see any of you again—" He paused to hug each of them. "When I heard bells. At first I thought it was ringing in my ears! But it seemed to be bells, little bells, sleigh bells, getting closer. And over it I heard the same three words, with different inflections: 'Ho ho ho... HO HOOO Ho... HO HO ho...'"

"And then I heard a voice, above me on the road, call out 'Whoa there, boy and girl, stop here... Whoa! WHOA! That means you TOO, Lucy, you vixen. I said WHOA.' And then the bells slowed and stopped, except for a brief peal of little bells

every now and then. And a voice called out 'Hello! Merry Christmas!'"

"I screamed back a merry 'Help!'"

"'I see you, young man,' came a cheerful voice. 'I'll be down there in just a minute. You've certainly got yourself in a predicament.'"

"And the next thing I know there's a pair of black boots there. And there are heavy red trousers tucked in them. And over them a red coat held shut by a wide black belt and the whole thing trimmed with white fur, at least the parts that weren't covered by a long white beard. I started to get worried (the shock of the fall must have confused me) because I wasn't sure I'd been a good boy this year. And I was afraid what I'd see when I looked up past the beard. But finally I looked... and there was a red hat trimmed in fur with a white ball at the end..." And there Mr. Johnson paused, to let suspense build for the children, even though they'd all heard this story many times before.

"Finally I looked at the face and there was a cheerful face with two sparkling eyes, and I suddenly knew I had nothing to fear. I wasn't sure what to do, so finally I found my voice and said 'Merry Christmas.' It came out almost a question and, especially compared to the cheery greeting I had been given, sounded weak but it was the best I could do. But the answer was firm: 'Yes, young man, yes it is a Merry Christmas.'"

"I've broken my leg—"

"He told me, 'Actually, you've just sprained it, but badly, and you aren't walking out of here on that so I'll have to carry you.'"

"And he reached under me, easily lifted me up and I had the strangest sensation as we went up the embankment. Part of me was thinking, 'wow he really goes up steep banks well' and part of me was thinking, 'Santa goes up chimneys which are lots steeper.'"

"At the top of the embankment there was a sleigh and it was harnessed to two animals that were the size of horses but thinner, like deer, and both crowned by antlers. I'm looking at them while he's putting me in the passenger seat of the sleigh and finally blurt out 'Those are reindeer.'"

"He gave a little chuckle and said, 'Of course they are. What did you expect? That girl in front of you is named Lucy, except at this time of year when she goes by her stage name of Vixen. The boy next to her is Jimmy but you'd know him as Dasher.' And each perked up its ears as he said their name."

"And he buckled me in and bundled me up in a blanket, which felt nice and warm. As he was getting into his driver's seat and buckling up I had to ask 'You have seatbelts?'"

"And he answered, 'Very important in a vehicle like this.' Then he took the reins and shook them and called 'Go Jimmy! Go Lucy! Or if you prefer: On Dasher. On Vixen!' and we started to move forward with a jingle of sleigh bells.

"'Give me a little feedback here,' he requested. 'Ho Ho Ho.' I shook my head, 'No.' He tried a few more versions, none of which were right either. Finally I told him, 'You sound like an ostrich with a sore throat.' And he started to laugh, which turned into a full belly laugh of 'Ho Ho Ho!' 'Now you've got it,' I declared."

"We drove for about fifteen minutes, with me getting colder in spite of the blanket, and my leg throbbing. I shivered violently. And he looked down at me kindly and said, 'I think we'd better take the shortcut and get you inside and warm sooner.' He called out, 'OK, boy and girl, we're going to do this as practice so it's by the numbers. Even though you aren't all here- Up Dasher, that's you Jimmy, up Dancer, up Prancer and Vixen, that's you girl!' and they strained at their harnesses, eager to go. I can't remember the rest of the reindeers names," Mark claimed, though he could usually rattle them off now, "but he knew all the names in the list."

"And the reindeer pulled harder and the man next to me got a

good grip on the reins with his hands and set his feet on the floor... and the wind blew harder... and I got the strangest feeling that we were going up when the ground was going down. And I decided that either I was getting light headed from hypothermia...or we were flying. So I closed my eyes and enjoyed the strange feeling and listened to the sleigh bells, the wind and the hearty ‘ho ho ho’ of the driver.”

“Soon enough we had a little bump and a turn and started to slow and I opened my eyes and looked around. We were pulling up to a cute little house with gingerbread trim and a hitching post out front. The sleigh stopped next to the hitch and the driver tied up. Then he got down, unbuckled me, picked me up again with that uncommon strength and carried me through the door.”

“Inside, it was warm and cheerful. There was a Christmas tree decked, with one special star sparkling at the top. There was the pleasant smell of food cooking and cookies baking. Wrapping paper and ribbon was scattered on the floor. A little stranger was a bunch of world maps with bits of ribbon pinned to it and little post-it notes stuck here and there. Alarming, there was a scuttle of coal next to the desk that also held the tape dispenser and rolls of ribbon.”

“A beautiful dark haired woman blew into the room- I don’t know how else to describe how much energy she had- blew into the room, smiled, kissed Santa and looked at me. Santa said ‘Merry Christmas’ to her, kind of offering me to her.”

“She said, ‘It’s not Christmas yet so we could put him under the tree...but I think he’d be more comfortable on the couch.’ So Santa carried me over and put me on the couch. He called out, in a voice that echoed through the house, ‘Auri! Could you come here?’”

“A few seconds later...an elf appeared in one of the door ways. Must have been an elf. She was small and petite, looked about 12, except for her eyes which looked much older. She was dressed in a red pointed hat, green tights and a brown tunic, with little snowflakes sewn to it. She smiled as soon as she saw Santa and announced, ‘The first three sacks are packed, I just put Dasher and Vixen in the stable, and your other suit is drying.’ Then she looked at the Mrs. and pointedly said, ‘And I took YOUR cookies out of the oven because they were starting to burn.’”

“Santa smiled, ‘Could you tell Doc that this gentleman is a patient? Badly sprained leg.’ And she replied, ‘Sure. I saw Doc out back’ and just sort of disappeared out the door she’d entered by. Ten seconds later she rushes down the stairs from the other direction, holding a quilt, announces, ‘I told him. He’s getting his bag’ and is wrapping the quilt around me.”

“She told me, ‘My name Auri. Have a cookie’ and just like that she’s holding a plate of cookies right out of the oven. After she got me to take the plate and had me nicely wrapped up she said, ‘I’ve got to go feed the reindeer’ and rushed out again.”

“I sat on the couch, wrapped in a quilt, eating cookies, while another elf, in green and red, iced my ankle and pressed a mug of hot chocolate on me to counteract the chill of the ice. It was warm and peaceful and comfortable... and I started to get sad because I wasn’t with you...”

“The pretty lady asked me what was the matter and when I told her she said, ‘That’s no problem. We’ll get you home- before Christmas, of course!’ So I spent a couple of hours on the couch helping to wrap presents... I was in charge of putting on bows... and then I got tired about the time Santa came in and said it was time to go.”

“I had a hot mug of eggnog with extra nutmeg down my throat, warming my tummy, was wrapped up good in blankets, scarves, mittens and such and was plopped in the sleigh and securely buckled. Santa shook his reins, named all the reindeer and we were off in a blast of wind. The eggnog, it was probably the extra nutmeg, made my head spin and the wind threatened to

freeze my eyelids, so I kept them closed and tried not to dread. And before I knew it we were slowing, as we sledded into the driveway.”

Santa hopped out and then helped me down, loaded my arms with presents for each of you, which I’d helped to wrap, and assisted me to the door.”

Little Susie (who was no longer so little) interrupted, as she did every year as tradition required, to ask “Did Santa have a present for you?”

“Yes, he did, but the best present was being home to see you on Christmas Eve.”

“Santa’s laugh boomed through the house and out into the neighborhood, he called you each by name. Mark,” he paused to smile at his son, “disappeared into the kitchen and I thought he was frightened but came right back, with carrots for the reindeer, who enjoyed the pitstop before the long journey of the night.”

“All too soon Santa had to depart for his trip. He got in his sleigh, waved to us all, and rode out of sight. But oddest of all, the words that I heard ‘Merry Christmas to all,’ seemed to float down from above.” And so Mark finished the story as he did every year.

Mark hugged his wife, hugged each of his children and then hugged his wife again (to the general amusement of all) and then the children went to get ready to go caroling and Mark and his wife went to get ready to help at the Christmas party at the children’s hospital, which Mark did every year.

His wife looked at him measuringly. “You know,” she said, “I think the kids are old enough for you to tell them what really happened that Christmas Eve.”

“What do you mean ‘really happened’? That’s what happened. I was rescued by Santa Claus on Christmas Eve.”

“Honey, I think the kids have figured it out. You got hurt on Christmas Eve in the mountains and were rescued by Superman. After his Clark Kent identity was exposed he and Lois moved to deserted areas, moving periodically, and when you got hurt they just happened to be in the area. Superman must have been practicing for Christmas Eve, because every Christmas time he goes all around the world trying to spread the holiday spirit and get people to make the world better. He visits orphanages and hospitals and such and puts on a show for kids. It’s really sweet, he sets a real example for the next year.”

“I still haven’t figured out if you misheard that ‘elf’s’ name. She’s probably the superhero Aurora now, Clark and Lois’s daughter, or is it granddaughter? She does do a lot of work in northern terrain, I think. But is it possible they were calling her ‘Laurie’ and you heard it as Auri?”

Mark looked back at her for several long seconds. “Honey?” he began. “As far as I’m concerned, on Christmas Eve several years ago, I got lost in the mountains, hurt my leg and was found and brought home by Santa Claus. And every year I try to pay back the stroke of Christmas luck that saved me by spreading Christmas cheer myself. Now hurry up and get ready, the kids will be waiting.”

THE END