

Dr. Santa Claus,

I don't think it's fair that you should only visit the boys and girls that celebrate Christmas. My family and I celebrate Chanukah and I only get one present a day, but so many of my friends get so many gifts on Christmas, I don't think it's fair. I would like you to reconsider your policy.

Happy Holidays,

Susan Hein

The handwritten letter on light blue construction paper sat quietly on the table, a plate of milk and cookies keeping it company. On the far side of the room, two candles burned inside a small steel menorah secured and anchored safely on the broad windowsill. In the nearby corner, stacked neatly on the floor was a small cache of presents. Each was wrapped in silver and blue paper, each with a different name written in the corner in gold pen. The warm living room was lit by soft light from the street outside and the flicker of the menorah flames. The room was quiet, as was the house as a whole. All was still in the wintry evening.

Without warning, the two flames of the menorah both danced abruptly. The soft light flickered and shook as shadows danced on the walls. The flames blew away from the fireplace, then towards it, then away from it again. A sudden cold wind swept through the living room with a gust and filled the lower level of the house with a tingling air. As the cold settled on the carpet and floor, a few spare snowflakes came whisking down into the warm room, floating in the air as the candles from the menorah settled once again.

At the far end of the house, the echo of tiny footsteps dribbled down the stairs. A little girl dressed in a set of pink footie pajamas slipped down onto the first few steps of the stairs and looked down into the living room. Two brunette pigtails dangled near her ears as she rubbed her sleepy eyes. She blinked a few times, looking at the still room. Her eyes drifted to the chimney as she realized something she couldn't place was amiss.

With a whisk of snow and a whirl of wind, the chimney seemed to expand. From out of the blustery tumult, a man in a red suit with a white fluffy beard appeared as if from the soot itself. The jolly man blinked a few times to get his bearings, taking a pleasant and approving look at the house he found himself in. He almost missed the cookies and milk on the table, doing a double-take when he recognized them.

He let out a delighted, cheerful laugh, just low enough that it could scarcely be heard. He started towards the cookies, then paused. He looked up and saw across the room, looking right at the little girl on the top steps of the stairs. As soon as his gaze went her way, she squeaked in shock and bolted back up the stairs.

"Oh, Susie," he called after her with a kind and friendly voice.

Just a few steps back down the hall to her bedroom, she froze. She glanced back at the stairs and slowly tiptoed back down. She crouched to look through the wooden bannister of her home. The man was still standing there, the thumbs of his mittens stuffed into the shiny buckle of his broad belt. He bent forward a bit so he could see her better and smiled with a paternal twinkle in his eye. "Hello there," he said with a jolly smile.

Susie crept slowly down the stairs a few more steps, her eyes saucers as she stared at the mythical man. "Y-you're real," she whispered.

He smiled, delighted at her innocence. He looked back at the plate of cookies, then over at the menorah. He turned back to Susie and smiled. "I think you and I should have a little talk," he grinned. He approached the cookies with delight, then considered the chairs around the table itself. He pulled one out and sat down, his knees popping a bit as he sighed with relief. He saw Susie still staring from between the arms of the stairwell bannister. He chuckled and nudged the adjacent chair with his toe, pushing it out. "Here you go." He gestured at the chair. Susie crept down the rest of the way and slowly approached the table. She crawled into the chair, her unblinking eyes locked on the man.

With a shiny mitten, he reached out to the plate of cookies and pulled one off the top. He bit into it and then his eyes went wide. "Chocolate chip," he said with absolute delight. "Oh, I never get tired of these." He looked at the little girl sitting next to him and smiled. He gave a little chuckle as he wagged the cookie at her and explained, "You know, this is how I know which houses to visit."

Susie stared, dumbfounded for a moment, then looked at the plate of cookies and the big glass of milk. "The cookies?" she asked with a bit of a squeak to her already high voice.

He nodded as he took another bite. It was a small nibble, that of a connoisseur savoring perfection. He closed his eyes in delight, as if it was the first cookie he'd tasted in a year.

Susie didn't mean to be so blunt but it just sort of blurted out. "Why do you only visit boys and girls on Christmas?" she asked.

The jolly man wasn't affronted at all. Quite the opposite, he smiled kindly, his cheeks turning even rosier. He seemed genuinely proud of her gumption as he explained, "I visit little boys and girls for more than Christmas." She looked confused. "I'm here, aren't I?" he said. He held out his arms and turned a bit to take in her holiday-decorated home.

Susie looked with him, turning to her left and then her right. "But..." she said, betraying further confusion. "I, I don't see any presents." She grew bolder. "You always bring presents to boys and girls who celebrate Christmas. I don't think it's fair you don't bring any presents to kids who celebrate other holidays."

The joyful man leaned back in the chair, laughing raucously, his belly shaking in the act. When he was done laughing, he sat forward again, his face broad with a warm smile. "My dear, I bring presents to the boys and girls who are good for goodness' sake."

"You've never brought me any presents," she asked, her eyes still wide as she stared up at the man.

He leaned towards her and said softly, like it was a secret, "This is the first time you've asked."

Susie's face went through a wash of different expressions as she wrestled with that thought, during which, the grand man only smiled. Finally, Susie blinked and blushed sheepishly. The big man stood up from the table, taking one last cookie. He winked at her and started for the chimney. Susie stood as well, watching him go. She hovered by the table, wanting to ask a hundred questions and unable to think of a one.

He reached the edge of the brick fireplace and stopped. He turned back to her. "This time of year, it's important to remember all about those around you, neighbors and strangers alike, and for keeping good cheer. No matter who you are or what you believe, this is the time when the world remembers to be good." He smiled at her with a wink. "And that's what I'm all about: rewarding good."

He stepped back, putting one big black boot up on the hearth. "And if I were you, come the final day of Chanukah, I'd check under the Menorah." He winked. "And just see what you find."

With a wink, he wiggled his nose. A gust of wind from within the house came rushing by Susie. A swirl of snowy air swirled around her and

he was gone. The flakes of snow floated in the air like brisk motes, drifting back to earth in the calm after the magical departure.

Susie was left staring in awed delight at the fireplace.