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The younger of the two, a precocious five-year-old, took the grim news in stride. "I'm not particularly taken aback by this revelation of yours," she said and went back to translating *The Illiad* from the original Greek into Esperanto. This sort of reaction from her I rather expected. Undaunted, I proceeded to enlighten the older of the two, a tom-boyish six-year-old.

At age eight I had rather a sadistic streak in me and I must admit that the ensuing tears and quivering lower lip of my sister gave me a great deal of satisfaction. The feeling disappeared completely when I turned my back and she bopped me on the head with her 34-inch Louisville Slugger. Dutifully I bopped her back.

My mother and father was appalled. "He's beating his sisters," they wailed. "Next he'll be accosting women in the street, then murdering in the night and he'll wind up on a scaffold somewhere and we won't ever be able to show our faces in public."

It's surprising how many lessons come out of incidents like this. That day I learned that dream smashing carries with it great responsibility, that no matter how hard you grit your teeth you can't dull the pain of a hairbrush on the backside, and that you must never give bad news to a tomboy without first putting on a football helmet.

Although I was fast becoming a Christmas cynic, somewhere deep within the darkest recesses of my mind lay a faint glimmer of hope that the disbelievers were wrong. That little flickering flame was almost snuffed on my 13th Christmas.

My sisters had gone to bed and my mother asked me if I wanted to help her put the presents under the tree and fill the stockings.

As I placed each gift under the tree I became aware of a creeping, full depression descending upon me. As I filled my sisters stockings the sensation sharpened. By the time my mother asked me to help myself to the milk and cookies because her colon was acting up, I was ready to slash my wrists, drink antifreeze and jump off the Brooklyn Bridge. What a lousy way to

spend Christmas Eve.

"Ho, ho, ho," I mumbled sarcastically to myself as I crawled into bed. There were no visions of sugar plums dancing in my head that night. I slept fitfully, awaking occasionally and murmuring "life really stinks" to the darkness.

In the morning my sisters came bounding into my bedroom to inform me that they couldn't start opening their presents until I got up. I dragged myself out to the living room and plopped myself down into a chair. For some reason there seemed to be more presents under the tree than I remembered putting there. Also the stockings seemed a lot more full.

We began opening our presents and I had quite a few more than I bargained for. I started feeling pretty good. Strange as it may seem, parents really do get smarter the older you get. Only a year before I'd thought Mom was a real airhead but that day I conceded she probably was a genius. She had sensed my depression the night before.

But the crowning glory of the day was a little box I found in my Christmas stocking. My tomboy sister had made me a peculiar little ceramic turtle, a preposterous-looking thing with an irregular shell, a grotesque head, and painted in a brilliant emerald green. I recognized it immediately as a peace offering of sorts. Several days before, in a fit of pique, she had deposited my pet turtle in the toilet and pressed the lever.

Around the ceramic beastly was wrapped a note, upon which was written, "Merry Christmas. I am truly sorry I flushed Harley down the John. I really didn't think he'd go all the way down."

Since that day I have never been depressed around Christmas time. Sometimes, when I'm in bed on Christmas Eve, I even imagine I hear the faint tinkling of bells, the muffled hoofbeats of reindeer upon the roof and occasionally even a little "ho ho ho."

If ever again anyone tells me there is no Santa Claus I may bop him. He'll learn like I did that you pay a high price when you try to shatter someone's dreams.

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