

“The Salvation of St. Shalom”

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Shalom Paetz, my father and rabbi of our congregation, is in full conniption. It’s Christmas Eve and the pizza delivery man is late, again. I can hear my father’s breathing from halfway up our staircase where I’m hiding. He stands at our house’s front entrance. The only sound I hear is his breathing. It’s angry and hot, steaming up the glass door.

Peering through the slats on the staircase I see him. Am I scared? Not really, but I still can’t come downstairs for another 29 minutes—6:00 being the end of my father’s davvening time and all. Besides, this is the best seat in the house to witness what will transpire once the pizza guy shows up. I feel sorry for him.

From this vantage point I notice for the first time how my father’s frame fits snugly inside the door’s like he’s wearing it. Though I never thought of him as fat, there is a volume to him to be sure. Normal human contours—the common flares and tapers of the body—are nowhere to be found. Even his killer *peyes* and beard suggest heft.

And yet, when he chases me through the house—I’m the dumbest Jew around, he says,—his moves are remarkable for someone his size. Sometimes he runs so fast after me that the sash of his caftan unties and both ends of the garment fly open. He looks like some black prehistoric bird, eyes trained on its prey. He has hands of incredible speed that can snatch your hair without warning. Which is why I will wait another 28 minutes, peering through the railing slats, watching my father watching for the delivery man.

I like the pizza from V&J Brothers. The cheese drips off the slice just right and the sauce doesn’t burn the roof of your mouth. We order it about once a month. I guess my father thinks that the two Sicilian owners obey Kashrut laws when the Paetzes order the extra large 18-inch. Or that it just doesn’t matter for pizza that good.

Always late and never kosher.

Ten minutes late. Twenty minutes late, and no sign of V&J. My father starts cursing in Yiddish under his breath. More than pure anger it’s his wish for sanctity that keeps him looking outside the door.

You see, he's keeping sentry for God. Since he bought the house from two gay Vietnamese landscapers in the early seventies no Gentile has ever touched any part of our house, inside or out, as far as I know. All hired repairmen—plumbers, carpenters, electricians—working on our house are Jewish. And, just in case a non-Jewish handyman or solicitor stops by unannounced, make-shift polymer “seals” on the doorbell and door handle provide a back-up level of security. In the evenings, all protection is removed and discarded. Only after arriving at Brandeis years later did I realize the extent of my father's illness and that the only thing kosher was his neurosis.

And all that sanctity—ten years of watching guard—gone this evening, Christmas Eve 1979, when Joseph Raddell comes inside our house.

A light brown 1967 Cutlass convertible creeps pass our house, pushed by a man who, by some miracle, does not slip on the snow, now increasingly treacherous terrain as the temperature drops. The car slows to a stop and Mr. Joseph Raddell Jr., our pizza delivery man—I was soon to find out his name—claps his gloved hands together brushing off the snow. He props up the hood and makes a bee line for our front door.

Like always, I expect my father's greeting will be something out of a ballet. Without touching the man, he will exchange pizza for money, trade pleasantries and smiles, all the while positioning his body to out-manuever the impure Treif. A snake charmer having his way with the snake.

But not today.

“Can I help you?” my father asks as he steps outside.

“Merry Christmas,” says Mr. Raddell, removing his gloves and extending his hand. My father keeps his inside his jacket pockets.

“I have a little problem here with my car and I wanted to see if I can use your phone.” Mr. Raddell looks back at the car half-expecting it to say something.

“No apology?”

“I am sorry I'm late.”

“And you are?”

“Joe Raddell.”

“You don't live around here, Mr. Raddell, do you?”

“Ah, no sir, I don't,” he says chuckling. “I'm the pizza guy. I've got your pie in the car.”

My father blinks a few times letting the silence balloon to an uncomfortable level. I saw him use this tactic before with other visitors to our home, and I think he learned it in *Psychology Today*, to which my father still subscribes today, nearly 30 years later.

“Why did you not bring it with you up to the door?” he asks standing between the man and our door.

“I will, I will. I just really need to use your phone.”

“I’ve heard that is how your people work.”

“Excuse me?”

“You want to use the phone to gain access to the inside of my house.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I understand very clearly, Mr. Raddell, what you want.”

“Look, man, it’s cold out here. I don’t have time for jokes. I need to call V&J and have them send someone to get me.”

“I can’t.”

“Why can’t you?”

“I do not know you. I do not know what you will do once inside my house. I do not even know if you work for the pizzeria,” oddly stressing the last syllable like some linguistic slap in the face.

“You are one crazy dude.”

“I want my pizza.”

Mr. Raddell puts his gloves back on and walks back to his car. Still on the stairs I see through the living room window Mr. Raddell get into his car and lean in the direction of the passenger side, mouthing something. I imagine him safely saying curses of his own in his own language while nobody could hear. In the kitchen my father flips through the Yellow Pages searching for Chinese, snapping angrily each page as he goes.

It’s 6:17 and I’m allowed to come downstairs now but it’s easier to spy on the pizza man from the stairs. The snow drips like corn syrup down the window blurring my vision. The Cutlass looks empty. The doorbell rings. My father opens the front door and finds our pizza on the stoop. My father loves pizza. No doubt, he will eat it standing up, no plates, no napkin. Like always, there will be congealed cheese finding its way into crevasses between his teeth, tomato sauce soaking in a nest of whiskers. Lions drunk on the blood of the kill.

My eyes are drawn again to the car and its fogged up windshield. Mr. Raddell isn't cursing to himself. There's someone else in the car, in the passenger seat, a shadowy grayish blur like something you find on the TV when the picture is snowy. A boy's face, not more than five or six. Eyes and mouth contorted in a cold, helpless cry pressed up against the window. A cry that will end only when he falls asleep much later tonight. I watch the scene—father consoling son—with an odd fascination, like a movie with the sound turned off.

The boy bolts out of the car onto our snow-covered lawn, barefoot. Mr. Raddell chases after him. Now the cries are audible, more desperate, the scene more surreal. The father finally catches the son and wraps him in the coat he had been wearing.

Six twenty-seven. The Raddells are in their car. My father is with the pizza. And I feel helpless, wanting to do something for them.

When I was younger my father had us practice a fire drill. Cold, December night. My father wanting to simulate real life conditions. The ladder slipped off the icy window sill, crashed through the gutters and landed with a thud on the lawn covered in snow. My father still made me climb out of the window. My mother was embarrassed that the neighbors were all looking. But tonight there's no ladder and it's me who slips on the iced-over roof. Feet precariously on the gutter, fingers gripping cold shingles.

“Drop your feet and legs. I'll catch you.”

“What?”

“Just let go. I'll catch you.” I don't see him, but I do what he says and release my grip, free-falling blindly into his arms.

“You're crazier than your old man.” he says.

“Come with me. My name is Reuben Paetz and I live here,” I say a bit too eagerly.

And that's when I tell the first two lies of my life.

“I have the money for the pizza, and my dad said you can use the phone.”

I can't explain the lie or why I climb out the window. But I do. Mr. Raddell carries me to the front stoop and we ring the doorbell together. There's a black man carrying my son, that's what my father is thinking as he opens the door. I speed inside but he grabs my arm.

“So, what, you thought it would be funny?” he asks. This was not a question to be answered so I didn’t.

“You know who runs around in the snow with no shoes on their feet? People who deliver pizzas run around in the snow with no shoes on their feet. Do you want to be like them? Get the key.”

“Pop, no.”

“Get the key. Thirty minutes. I’ll be up to check on you. Rules are rules.”

“Pop, there’s a little boy.”

“Reuben, now!”

Several times in the past, without his knowledge, I disobeyed him, lying still on the floor outside my room. That’s what I think of your stinking rules. But I go upstairs with the key anyway, and lock the door with me inside. I could still hear the commotion downstairs.

“My boy has asthma, Mr. Paetz.”

“It’s Rabbi, and what does his condition mean in this situation?”

“There’s a pay phone down the road. I need him to stay warm, inside, here with you.”

“No. You shouldn’t have brought him out on such a cold night.”

“Mr. Paetz?”

“Rabbi.”

“Rabbi, if he doesn’t get inside, he’ll get very sick. So sick that we might have to call the police and an ambulance. I don’t think you want that.” The rabbi thinks for a second. “He stays on the couch.”

“I will not be gone long. Thank you, and Merry Christmas.”

“Please stop saying that. We’re Jewish. You sound very stupid when you say that.”

Now, there’s a black boy in his living room, the rabbi thinks, as he retires back to his study. Only a few minutes later, Mr. Raddell returns.

“‘10 minutes’, that’s what Vinny said,” Mr. Raddell yells to no one as he walks into our house. “Is anybody home? Joey, where did they go?”

“Daddy, I’m hungry,” says the little boy.

“I’m sure Vinny will be here soon.”

“I can’t wait, Daddy, I’m starving.”

“I know, son, but this ain’t our house. We can’t ask these people to feed us.”

With my ear pressed against the floorboards I hear my father’s muffled voice rise and fall as he davvens in his study. There are four people in our house but it’s an unnerving silence that dominates for 30 minutes save the murmurings of my father.

It's almost seven o'clock. My father's study door opens, the floorboards creak, and the staircase railing moans under tremendous weight as my father heads back upstairs to release me.

"Tell them to go, Reuben," my father says as he unlocks my door and lies down on his bed. Only I descend the staircase and approach Mr. Raddell and his son.

"My father says you have to leave."

"Leave? We can't leave. No car."

"Please."

"I bet you're hungry," Mr. Raddell says bending down to meet my eye-level, "You know, I'm a great cook. Cooked in the army in Saigon. Cooked for 3-star generals and Dinah Shore. How about I make us an omelet and we can all share it?"

Before I can answer I hear pots and pans clanking on the stove. Meats and sausages sizzle, eggs crack, milk pours. I realize then that Mr. Raddell is using our meat pan and has put dairy in it. I praise God that my father cannot hear from his upstairs bedroom. We eat silently on the couch, our paper plates on our laps, looking out into the black void of the night.

In what seems like mere seconds we finish eating. The snowflakes are bigger now, the size of daisies. They fall fast to the ground. Mr. Raddell's eyes train on a particular flake and I watch him follow it as it settles gently on the snow. I look up at the sky through the window, choose my flake, and watch it to the ground. Joey observes us both and follows suit. Soon, the three of us are engaged in snowflake watching as we have nothing else to do.

Across the street I see families settling in for the evening. Big brightly colored trees stand in living rooms. Pyjamaed children sit in their parents' laps. Dogs lying in front of roaring fireplaces long for some time alone. I look around my living room. It is different. Across the street, only fifty feet away looms a foreign country. A forbidden city. A world that is both fascinating and terrifying.

"How old are you?" said Mr. Raddell breaking my reverie.

"Thirteen."

"Do you play any sports?"

"Some basketball, I guess."

"Well, good for you."

No sign of Vinny. Or anybody for that matter. The three of us sit on the couch, awkwardly, with dirty plates on our laps, afraid to move.

“How long have you and your dad lived here?”

“I don’t know, I wasn’t born then.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. How’s school? You get good grades?”

“I guess.”

“Little Joey’s gonna start school next year.” Good.

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?” Nope.

“So, tomorrow, you get all the presents!” We celebrate Hanukkah.

“Oh, yeah, that’s right. Well, tell us about Hanukkah, then,” says Mr. Raddell pronouncing it ‘heynuka.’

I rise from the couch and feel nervous like before my Bar-Mitzvah. I tell them about the Greeks, Syrians, Hannah and her sons, Antiochus, Judah Maccabee, the Temple oil and the eight nights. And Joey is rapt with interest. Mr. Raddell, too. This is what my father must feel every Saturday morning at the pulpit.

“So, you got eight presents. Not a bad gig!” Sometimes you get money, I say. “That’s okay too.” He smiles at me, swiveling his head and looking around.

“What happened to your father? Where is he?”

Mr. Raddell walks around our living room again looking at the family photos and knickknacks peering every now and then at the road.

“It must be nice having such a big house for you and your dad.”

“It’s alright.”

“I bet you have a lot of sleepovers, don’t you?”

“No, not really.”

“Aw, why not? It would be fun.”

Then, he stops as he gets to a photo on our bookcase.

“Reuben, is this your mom?”

I don’t answer and look down. Look at sofa cushions, look at little Joey, anything but look at Mr. Raddell.

“Where is she? Is she working tonight? She seems like a real nice lady.”

I should answer. It seems like an honest question. But I don’t. I stare at the white walls of our living room and hope for one of two options: that Mr. Raddell will forget the question or that I will disappear. Neither happens. Instead, the white walls of our living room behind Mr. Raddell turn

black. Sateen black. It doesn't register for a second or two but when my eyes recalibrate they focus on my father standing behind Mr. Raddell, a souvenir baseball bat in his right hand. My souvenir bat I got last year at Thurman Munson Day at Yankee Stadium.

Mr. Raddell, unaware of my father's presence behind him, continues with his monologue.

"Working on Christmas Eve is no fun I'll tell ya. Let me call again. I don't know what's taking him."

"Put down that picture and get out of my house," my father says calmly, surprising Mr. Raddell who turns and recoils.

"What are you doing?"

"You and your son can wait for your friend in your car. The boy is fine. Not sick."

"Vinny's coming."

"Nobody is coming. I said get out of my house," says my father, now advancing on Mr. Raddell.

"Now, you know, Mr. Paetz, I can't do that," he says walking backwards.

"I see what you are trying to do. The whole thing. The car, the asthma, one big charade. And how dare you come into my house and ask questions of this nature! About my wife?"

"Please put the bat down."

"Are you not a man?"

"Excuse me?"

"You use trickery and cunning to break into my house, eat my food—don't think I didn't notice—and ask such ridiculous and rude questions!"

"I just meant to start a conversation with your boy. You know, pass the time. Put the bat down."

"Get out of my house!"

"You don't scare me, Mr. Paetz. I know you. Hell, I was you for six months! The anger, the screaming all the time. My wife left me three years ago and it's only been the last couple months since I—"

He doesn't complete his sentence. Shalom Paetz, my father and rabbi of our congregation, raises the bat high above his head like an American Moses at Sinai and strikes the Pizza Man, Joe Raddell, cracking ribs on the right side.

The bat drops. Raddell staggers to the couch, moaning in pain, his son too confused to cry. My father takes two steps backward, hands quivering, then arms, then face. Out squirt four short breaths.

“What... have... I... done?” And he runs back to his study.

“Are you okay,” I ask Mr. Raddell.

“Having a little trouble breathing but it’s fine.”

“Let me get you some ice.”

From the kitchen I hear him moaning, wincing. When I return, little Joey is sitting next to his father looking frightened.

“Is your dad always like that?”

“Please don’t call the police,” I beg him.

“I won’t. The cops would want to know what I’m doing here anyway on Christmas Eve.”

“Why would they want to know that?”

“I like you, kid,” says Mr. Raddell with a smile. “Thanks for the ice.”

The snow is back again. Huge flakes moving a million miles an hour.

“Well, if Vinny ain’t left now, he’s ain’t ever coming.”

This concerns me since Mr. Raddell is probably going to die right there in my living room and my father will be in jail and will have to go live with my great Aunt Ida and her bad breath. I don’t want him to die, and his son looks so sad. I go upstairs to my closet and find a Han Solo action figure that my father had thought that a 13-year-old would want. I get scotch tape and re-wrap the present, the wrinkly wrapping paper not fitting all the way around. I bound down the stairs and offer it to Joey.

“Merry Christmas,” I say for the first time in my life.

“Daddy, look!” he says tearing away the paper.

“You tell Reuben thank you,” says Mr. Raddell, who sounds a little better. The three of us wait for a few moments listening to the tapping of the snow on the windows. Joey plays with Han Solo.

“Don’t worry, Joey, we’ll be home in time to put milk and cookies for Santa,” he says slurring his words. In seconds, he’s asleep supine on the couch. Little Joey starts crying softly. It’s a cry I know all too well.

This is my Christmas Eve 1979.

I am in my father's study only he doesn't notice I'm there. He's sitting, head bent on right hand. Could be sleeping or thinking or something else entirely.

“Are they finally gone?”

“No, Pop.”

“Why not?”

“Mr. Raddell can’t move.”

“Who's Mr. Raddell?”

“The pizza man.”

“Then call him ‘the pizza man’.”

“The pizza man can't move, Pop. It's snowing really bad outside and they have to stay here.”

“They can’t stay here.”

“He’s hurt real bad, Pop.”

This is when my father laughs.

“Get them out of here, Reuben. I don't care how you do it just get them out of here.”

“I can't Pop.”

“Then I will call the police and take my chances. Bring me the phone.”

“No, Pop.”

In one swift movement he’s standing. I am frightened because I will soon smell his breath on me, feel the viscous spit on my head as he yells.

“You’re fercockt in the head,” he says calmly.

“The police will ask questions about how he got hurt.”

“How he got hurt? He broke into my house!”

“Pop, they need us. You can’t—.”

He moves a quick stride closer to me.

“I cannot what, Reuben?”

“What about in the Bible? Proverbs. It says in Proverbs that—”

“You are telling me what’s in the Bible? Reuben! Shvartzes! They are just shvartzes and you’re carrying on like this! Please, Reuben, this has been a crazy night and I’m tired. Do what you want with them. I don’t care anymore. I’m going to sleep.”

“But, Pop, you need to help them.”

“I said I don’t care anymore and they can sleep on that shmata couch. We’re getting a new one anyway,” says my father sitting back down in his chair.

“What about the boy?”

“What about him?”

“He—it’s a special night for him.”

“A special night. Explain.” He rises and approaches me again, slowly.

“We did a bad thing, Pop. We owe it to them.”

“Good night, Reuben.”

“We have all the stuff we need to do it and you know where.”

“It? What is the ‘it’ we have to do? What are you talking about? What stuff?”

“Stuff to make, you know, a costume.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“It’s, you know, their holiday.”

He puts his heavy arms on my shoulders and laughs. The terror wells inside of me.

“Oh, my little Goyisha Hero! You do make me laugh. What is wrong with you? These are strangers in our home. Treif. Not even good Treif. Why would you care? Why am I talking to you about this?”

“Mom would do it,” I say, without thinking, obviously.

“What did you say?”

“Mom would think it’s the right thing to do.”

He bites his lower lip enough that his beard swallows up his mouth. All I can see is that beard and those eyes. Fury and silence, like two schoolyard bullies coming back to pay a visit. Everything about his gaze tells me to leave that room. That face is too much and I press my eyes shut. In an instant I am off my feet in the air and feel my body bent over his knee, my pants pulled down around my ankles.

“I told you never to do that!”

“Please, Pop, don’t!”

“Don’t you dare talk about her like that! Soil her name. You should be ashamed.”

He’s screaming now, spittle landing on the back of my head. But he does not spank me. We stay in that position for a long time. One minute, maybe. He gently puts me down and collapses to the floor, hunched over in lotus position, pants puckering in odd places. He’s having trouble breathing and stares at the floor for a moment. I can tell that he wants me to stay, wants me to say something. His mouth relaxes. Then, finally, through a voice dried with emotion he says,

“Nothing.”

“What, Pop?”

“That was the last word I said to her, ‘nothing’. She asked me what I wanted to watch on TV and I said ‘nothing’ and fell asleep. Isn’t that the most ridiculous thing? That was the last word she ever heard from anybody. She was gone by the morning.”

Seated on the floor, hunched over like something wounded in the forest, my father and rabbi of our congregation, begins to cry.

“Reuben, I am sorry for these last years, but I cannot do what you want. I cannot go into that room,” he whispers. “I won’t go into that room.”

“Please, Pop,” I say. “Mom would do it.”

He doesn’t move. His head swivels in my direction and at once I understand the pain, the grief, the anger and the love that bind us together, the three of us—Shalom, Reuben and Sarah Paetz, his dead wife and my dead mother whom I miss terribly these last five years.

“Will you come *with* me?” he asks. And this is the first question he’s ever asked that I was expected to answer. Yes, I say.

“Will you come with me, Reuben?” he asks again.

Not since July 19<sup>th</sup>, 1974 have I heard him talk about that room. And I haven’t been in there since that day. It’s just past my father’s study, before you get to the garage. On some days, as the late afternoon sun bleeds underneath the door, I sneak into that back hallway and kneel down, hoping to steal a shadow, a silhouette, something to help me remember it from five years ago. A Singer sewing machine and yards and yards of fabric, that’s all I remember. What I wouldn’t give to hear the staccato of that needle again.

I hold my father’s hand and lead him down the hallway. We pause at the doorway to the room. He places his right hand on the knob and twists. Congealed paint or humidity or something makes the door stick but we enter and turn on the light.

On the table lies a dress. Just as I had remembered. My mother was slender in the early years of her marriage. But from later photos you could tell she had gained a tremendous amount of weight as she approached forty. So embarrassed she was that she refused to shop for clothes at Bamberger’s or anywhere else, opting instead to make them by hand at home.

When I last saw her she was fashioning a dress for herself to wear for my cousin’s Bar-Mitzvah.

Red. Long-sleeved, Taffeta.

My father slowly approaches the unfinished dress and gathers its cascading fabric to his chest. The movement stirs the stagnant air in the room. Forgotten yet familiar scents wash over us. Chanel No.5, faint foot odors, unkempt leather and suede. We're immediately transported back to Seders and family gatherings, of good night kisses and Shabbat morning challah.

Then, with his back to me, my father unties the sash of his black sateen caftan and lets its sleeves slide off his arms. He folds the garment in half and places it on the sewing table. He undoes the drawstring of his pants and places them on the table.

A few years back while studying at my desk, I accidentally saw my father naked. His bedroom door was half-way open and he crossed back and forth from the shower to the bed. A series of images lasting a few seconds. An enormous being. A breathtaking sight. Like witnessing something biblical, the very buttocks of the Lord, a god in the nude.

And now, he here was, again, before me. T-shirt, tallis and boxers.

In a drawer I find some thick thread, a pair of large dress scissors and a sewing needle. My father drapes the dress lengthwise over his extended hands and looks vacantly out the window. I take the scissors and begin cutting the dress in half, lengthwise. The scissors fly through the fabric, soundlessly, effortlessly. In no time my mother's dress that had never been worn is laid open.

"Pop?"

"Yes, I know."

"Mom would think this is nice," I say in a whisper.

But he doesn't respond. Instead, he laces his left arm inside the left sleeve and the right arm in the right sleeve, and wiggles all 350 pounds of his frame into that dress, pinning his shoulders back the way he does proudly on the pulpit every Saturday morning at the open ark.

Then, with the dress covering only the front half of his body, he bows his head slightly closing his eyes, beckoning me to finish our work. And I recognize in that moment, that wordless gesture, as the first time fear releasing its grip on me. It's as if, by some trick of time and space, he has become a boy and I a man. I struggle to push the thread through the needle. To stop this absurd thing we are doing, this most ridiculous even sacrilegious, pagan thing we are doing seems to both of us

impossible. I stand behind him with the needle threaded and I begin to pull and stitch both ends of the back of the dress together.

Like tough skin, the fabric fights me with every piercing. With the back finally sewn together, I grab the unused thread and bite it off the needle just as my mother had taught me. Next, I staple the fabric between his legs and cut an upside down U-shaped swath from crotch to knees. I find two wide black belts in my mother's closet, cinch them together, and tie it around him.

Opening drawers I find a can of white glitter and I spray paint my father's beard as he covers his face with a piece of cardboard from the pizza box. The glitter spits out in globs, clotting the facial hair. And as I spray I hear my dad whisper through tears behind the cardboard.

“Slach Lanu, Mchal Lanu, Kaper Lanu.” I recognize it instantly as the Kol Nidre prayer of forgiveness. Pardon us, forgive us, absolve us.

We leave my mom's sewing room and walk towards the garage to find his black boots. We move towards the front of the house where Mr. Raddell lies wincing on the couch and his son seated next to him. I stop midway and let my dad walk the rest of the way alone. The red fabric makes a whooshing sound as he walks. He slows as he approaches the room. For a moment when no one on Earth can see him except me he waits. The moments turn into minutes and he stays absolutely still. Only his heaving back gives a clue he's still alive. Seconds later I hear Mr. Raddell's son.

“Santa!”

\* \* \*

Just after dawn I heard the front door shut and looked outside my bedroom window. There was the Cutlass, its hood open, Mr. Raddell working underneath it, and Joey standing next to him, Han Solo dangling in his hand. Within seconds he was finished and closed the hood. Braided tendrils of blue and white smoke trailed the car as it coughed back to life. And then they were gone.

I've spent every Christmas Eve since that day in 1979 with my father. Our annual reunion started out innocently enough—I was home during semester breaks in high school and college—but several years into our “December 24<sup>th</sup>” ritual, I made it a point to see him on that day. Some years I drove hundreds of miles, some years we ate pizza together, and one year I showed up just minutes before midnight frantically banging on the door. He didn't understand and was very upset that time. And in

1997 I surprised him with an airline ticket to Naples where my wife, our two sons and I were living at the time.

He's not aware of any of this. Or maybe he is and he's never discussed it, fearing any mention of it would bring a malediction upon our house. For me that evening is sacred. And my trip, a pilgrimage to a place I visit daily in my mind. It's a place where I began to matter, where my father started telling me my story and never finished it. He let me do that.

That night Joe Raddell's little boy, too, heard the story he wanted to hear. I often wonder what happened to that boy. Did he remember my dad as Santa? Did he ever ask his father to bring him back to our house? Did his father ever confess to disconnecting the ignition wire on purpose so that they could get warm on Christmas Eve? That boy is a grown man now and probably has a son who loves hearing the story too.

The rest of that night in the living room as Joey asked Santa—my father and rabbi of our congregation—question after question, my father would just nod and say 'yes'. Joey was transfixed. I saw the power of a story told over and over again, comfort and hope renewing themselves year after year. And when I return to my father's house each December 24<sup>th</sup> and look at the couch, I am reminded of those two wayward boys finding a home and finding their stories to tell in the night of the great myths.