

Dear Ms. Good,

When I was a child Christmas was a very special time for us. You see, when my grandfather was twelve he met my grandmother, who at the time was only five. They met on a Christmas morning in 1930 during the height of the Depression, which as you know was a time of great need for everyone. It seemed that everyone was in need of a few miracles, but very few people believed enough to get them. Not so, in the case of my grandparents. They very much believed.

The reason for my letter is that I recently read a story you wrote called "Harold the Elf". When I read it, I was taken back to the time of my childhood when I heard a different story about Harold. They would tell us how they met, and another charming tale of a little elf who called himself "Harold". When I read your story I wondered if this was the very same Harold who had helped my grandparents when they were young.

The way you described him seemed to fit their own descriptions of an elf that looked more like a boy than an elf.

I wanted to write you to thank you for taking me back to my childhood, to thank you for bringing back memories that were long forgotten, and bringing forth the magic that Christmas is really about.

Sincerely,

Ian Christianson

I got this letter shortly after I released the first edition of “Harold the Elf”. At first reading I was very touched that my little tale of a mischievous elf had done so much for this man. The second reading of the letter I understood what he really meant.

He had another story for me. He had been touched by Harold’s brand of magic that (I think) very few have been touched by.

I set out on another journey to find this man. He had left no return address, only a postmark from West Virginia and his name. The task ahead of me was going to be difficult indeed.

I started with a map and my telephone and began calling information for every Ian Christianson I could find in West Virginia. I found over 1,000 different listings for Ian or I. Christiansen! So one by one I began calling them all. At the end of my list, I still had not located the Ian I was looking for. So I hired a private detective to locate him.

After several months I finally got word that the private investigator had found the man I was looking for. He gave me his address and phone number. I must say that I had a moment of doubt about what I was about to do. I was about to push myself into someone’s life, when perhaps I wasn’t wanted.

But then I thought of Emma’s story and the amount of joy I had given (and received) by telling her story. Instead of calling him, I bought a plane ticket to West Virginia.

I arrived on Ian Christianson’s door on July 29, 2001, six months after receiving his letter. I knocked and waited for a moment, then knocked again.

The face that opened the door, held the most delightful smile I had ever seen. The twinkle in his eyes spoke of witnessed miracles.

“Can I help you?” He asked.

“My name is Jenny Good.” I said.

His smile broadened, and his face glowed with some inner joy that couldn’t be described, only felt.

“You’ve come for Harold.” He said and I nodded sharing in his smile.

“Come in. I have quite a story for you.”

I spent the afternoon and well into the late evening talking to the Christianson family, and what I learned about this little elf left me breathless in wonder.

Ian Christianson was absolutely correct. He had quite a story to tell.

So without further commentary from me, I give you his story. May you love it as much as I do.

Billy Christianson stared out the dirty window at the falling snow, trying to see through the blizzard for any sign of his father. It had been almost a year since Billy had seen him, and he missed him dearly. Neither Billy nor his mother knew if his father would be able to make it home for Christmas, but they both took turns watching and waiting by the lone window in their tiny cabin.

Billy felt his mother rest her hand on his shoulder. "Billy, you been there for hours. Come have some supper."

Billy shrugged his mother's hand off his shoulder and shook his head. Even though his belly rumbled, and he hadn't eaten all day, he knew that they were down to their very last bit of food and he would rather that his mother have the food as she needed it more than he did. He listened to her rattling cough as she threw one more precious log on the fire and wrapped herself in another blanket.

He turned away from the window and watched her walk behind the curtain to her "room". As the cabin was only one room big Billy slept on the floor near the stove because it was warmest there, and his parents slept behind the curtain. He listened as his mother gently lay down on the bed.

"Momma, I'm gonna go see if I can't find us some more wood. We're gettin low again."

"Okay, Billy. Don't be gone long."

"I won't, Momma." Billy promised.

He stuck his big feet into his tiny shoes, then wrapped his the toes of his shoes with thick cloth to hide the holes. Even though they were warm enough now, they wouldn't hold out for very long against the freezing wind outside.

He put on his coat, a gift of charity from one of the neighboring families, that Billy had had for three years, and though it was short in the sleeves and tight across the shoulders, it was still warm enough to protect him for a short time. There was nothing he could do to protect his legs from the cold. His pants were just too thin and had been sewn up and patched to many times to do any good against the winter weather.

Billy sighed, steeling his body for the draft of cold that would blast him when he opened the door. He opened the door and rushed outside, gasping in air as the bitter wind hit his body.

He fought against the wind up the road towards town. Through the falling snow he saw the lights from the Langley house. He frowned as he passed thinking of little Sarah stuck inside all the time. He stopped for a moment and watched the house thinking of the things that Sarah would never get to do because of the accident. As he stood watching the house, the front door opened and Mrs. Langley called outside.

“Billy? Is that you?” She called.

“Yes, Mrs. Langley!” He shouted back above the wind.

“Why don’t you come on it for a minute.”

Billy hesitated feeling ashamed of his clothes and his shoes, until Mrs. Langley called out again “We are writing letters to Santa! Come in out of the cold.”

He smiled and made his way towards the inviting home of the Langley’s.

As he stepped inside, Billy ducked his head with shame. His toes were poking out of his shoes, and he had lost the fabric that had been protecting his feet. He could no longer feel anything in his poor toes and they were blue from the cold.

Mrs. Langley gasped as she saw his feet and immediately ordered him to take off his shoes. She rushed to fill a bucket with cool water and before he could even protest she had him sitting in one of her fine chairs with his feet in a bucket of cold water.

“We are going to have to heat your feet slowly, because if the water is too hot then you could shock your feet, and then we’ll be in big trouble.”

Billy smiled shyly at the pretty Mrs. Langley, while she kneeled down in front of him. She was always so nice to him, nothing at all like the other townfolk who teased him constantly about the state of his clothes and shoes. She never even noticed that his clothes were often too small for him, and sewn and patched together so much that they should have been thrown out long ago, or turned into rags.

“Stay right here, Billy. Let me go get Sarah from the other room.”

Billy stayed right where Mrs. Langley told him to stay, not even moving a muscle. He heard Sarah’s chair creaking as Mrs. Langley rolled her into the room where Billy was.

Sarah’s face brightened when she saw Billy.

“It still works good, huh?” Billy said smiling at the wheelchair he had made for her two years ago.

“Yes, it still works very good.” Sarah said.

Billy and Sarah had been friends for a long time. It was Billy who had found Sarah after the accident and carried her home in the nick of time. The doctor often told him that had it not been for Billy’s quick actions and bravery at the time, Sarah would have died. But Billy had heard her screaming in the old silver mine, which happened to be near his favorite fishing spot. When he heard her screams he didn’t think at all, he just rushed into the mine and found the lower half of her body crushed beneath the collapsed ceiling. He

moved as much of the rock and dirt as he could, then pulled her out, and carried her to safety. Just as he reached the entrance of the mine, the rest of the ceiling caved in behind them. Had Billy not been so quick, or had run for help, Sarah would have died. Sadly though, the doctors couldn't fix her legs, and in order to keep her alive, they were forced to remove Sarah's legs from her knees down.

Billy had come over every day after Sarah's accident to make sure that she was okay. He sat by her bed and talked to her for hours on end, and as Sarah's body healed, she Billy became the best of friends.

Two summers ago, Billy had read about a contraption called a 'wheelchair' and decided that would be a good thing for Sarah to have. So he spent the entire summer building her one. He carved her name in it, and painted it white with pink flowers on the back and on the arms. Though the design of the chair was a little crude, and the wheels weren't exactly even, Sarah thought it was the most beautiful chair that had ever been built.

Sarah smiled at Billy from her chair, while Mrs. Langley made the kids some hot cocoa.

"What are you going to ask Santa to bring you for Christmas?" Sarah asked.

Billy thought about it for a moment then shrugged. "I hadn't really thought about it."

"What are you going to ask for?"

Sarah stared off into space for a minute before saying "Did you ever make a snow angel before?"

Billy shook his head and asked "What's a snow angel?"

"You don't know what a snow angel is?!"

And Billy shook his head.

"A snow angel is something you make right after a snow storm. You go outside and stand then fall backwards into the snow. You move your arms up and down and your" Sarah paused and looked down sadly before continuing "... legs back and forth. Then you get up. What you leave in the snow looks like an angel." Sarah sighed.

"I was going to ask Santa for one day when all I had to do was make snow angels. But I guess that's impossible."

Billy watched as Sarah picked at the threads of the blanket that covered her legs.

"Nothing's impossible Sarah." Billy said.

“You can say that, Billy, because you still have your legs. I guess I’ll just have to ask for a new doll or a new blanket something.” Sarah shrugged.

Billy had never felt more miserable in his whole life.

With a fake sense of happiness, Billy stood up and went to get the paper and pencils they would use to write their letters to Santa.

He handed some paper to Sarah, and a pencil, then he sat down, with his bare feet still dripping water, next to her and began his letter to Santa.

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Up in the North Pole, Harold the Elf sat with Santa going over the list of good boys and girls. He came to a name that had been scratched out years ago because the little boy had stopped believing.

He shook his head, and sighed. “Billy Christianson.” He said aloud. “He has always been such a good boy. Are you sure we can’t help him out this year?” Harold asked Santa.

“Harold, Billy stopped believing years ago. Don’t you remember that?”

“I know he did, but he has such a big heart.”

“If he doesn’t believe, then he doesn’t believe in us and there is nothing we can do.”

“But can’t we *make* him believe, Santa?”

Santa sighed and stared out the window. “I wish we could Harold. I really wish we could. What that boy needs is a good old-fashioned miracle. And don’t you be getting any ideas Harold! If you leave Pole Valley again, you may never be able to come back.”

“I know.” Harold said. But, of course, that didn’t stop Harold from his mission. After all, who better to make people believe than one of Santa’s very own elves, an elf that looked more like a boy than an elf.

That night Harold packed his traveling bag and snuck away, this time well-prepared for his battle with the bitter wind that was trying to destroy Pole Valley.

Late that night as the Eve Bell rang, which only rang for two reasons, once on Christmas Eve as Santa left to distribute his gifts, and it would ring again if an elf went missing. Since, it wasn’t Christmas Eve, as the Eve Bell rang, Santa knew that Harold was gone again. He stomped into the Elfin Lodge to find Harold’s mother, Millie, crying at the top of the stairs.

“Harold?” Santa asked.

“Yes.” Millie said.

Santa sighed and shook his head.

“Well, Millie, this time Harold won’t be able to come back to Pole Valley. I’m sorry. I tried to warn him, but...”

“Harold is Harold.” Millie said proudly. “Perhaps he was never meant to be here. He’s never been very good at making toys. And he doesn’t look like any of us, nor does walk like any of us. Harold never really fit in here.”

“I know, Millie.” Santa said, sitting down heavily on the step next to the Eve Bell.

“I’m going to miss him.” Santa said putting his arm around Harold’s mother, while she cried.

The rest of the elves hung their heads in silence, mourning the loss of little Harold.

“Harold knows what he is doing, Santa.” Ariel the Elf said from the crowd. “Perhaps we should be happy that he is doing something he is good at. He is good at making people believe again. We shouldn’t be sad for him. We should rejoice. Besides, you say that Harold won’t be able to come back, every time he disappears. And every time he makes enough people believe in you again that there is always enough magic to bring him home. Why can’t it be the same this year?”

Santa smiled and said “I am just all out of magic this year, Ariel. The bitter wind has battered us too hard this year. To use our remaining magic to bring Harold home, means that there will be nothing left to keep us safe. Harold made his choice to leave Pole Valley. He knew the consequences that if he left he would never be able to come home. We only get our magic from the people who still believe. There are not enough people that believe anymore to create enough magic to protect us and keep us safe. Harold is on his own.”

The Elfin Lodge was filled with the echoes of sadness as they mourned the loss of little Harold, for they knew that Harold could not stand up again against the bitter wind outside the safety of Pole Valley. The bitter wind hated him too much now, for Harold had bested her one too many times. As if to prove her point, the bitter wind swept Pole Valley shattering some windows of the Elfin Lodge.

“You see, one more person has just stop believing. At this rate, we’ll be lucky to last a few more years, my friends.” Santa said, as he used a little magic to fix the broken windows.

“Perhaps it is better that Harold has left. Perhaps he is the miracle we need.”

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Meanwhile, Harold was battling the bitter wind and fighting his way towards West Virginia. He knew he would never be able to go home, and while that made him sad, he was also excited to be starting on a new adventure.

The bitter wind attacked him, her rage screaming and stirring the fallen snow into a tornado that whirled around him, but Harold pressed on, unfazed by her anger and protected from it by his simple knowledge that he believed.

He made good time and was surprised at how easily he found the Langley's home. He watched the house for some time, knowing that inside there was a little girl who was on the verge of losing her faith in Santa Claus. But he smiled because she hadn't lost it quite yet. She was not the reason Harold had ventured forth from the safety of Pole Valley.

He headed towards the Christianson home. When he arrived he knew that the people inside wouldn't be able to see him, because of course they didn't believe he existed so how could they possibly see him. He walked inside quickly and closed the door behind him just as fast.

To Billy and his mother, it seemed as though the door had just blown open then shut without any reason at all. Billy got up from his mother's side and went to check the door. After ensuring that the door was closed tightly he went back to his mother.

Her illness had gotten worse. She could barely move and her forehead was hot to the touch. Billy helped her drink some water and sip some broth but there wasn't much he could do to help her. They had no money for a doctor, so Billy had to make do with what little they had.

Harold sat down and watching as Billy took great care of his mother. Harold looked down at the letter that was sitting half-written on the table. He was surprised when he saw who it was addressed to.

At that moment, Billy stood up and returned to the table to finish his letter. When he was done writing he set his pencil aside and said softly to the room "I don't know if you exist or not, but I want to believe that you do. I really want to believe."

"Then believe." Harold said.

Billy jerked in his chair and looked around, still not being able to see Harold, for he didn't entirely believe yet.

"Who's there?" Billy shouted in fear.

"My name is Harold."

Billy screamed, his mother jerked into a fit of coughing and choking, and Harold sighed and rolled his eyes at the drama of it all.

“What was that?” Billy’s mother said softly.

“I think I heard a ghost, mamma.”

“Don’t be silly.” She said as she relaxed back against the bed. “There’s no such thing.”

Harold shook his head.

“She won’t be able to hear me, Billy.” Harold said. “Only you can hear me. Do you believe that I am real?”

“I don’t know.” Billy said.

“And that is why you can only hear my voice.” Harold said, laughing at the funny expression on Billy’s face.

“I must be going crazy.” Billy whispered, so as not to disturb his mother again.

“No. You are perfectly sane.” Harold said.

“Who are you?!” Billy yelled, waking his mother again.

“I am Harold the Elf.” Harold said again.

“Harold the Elf?”

“Harold the Elf.” Harold said once more.

“Who is Harold the Elf?” Billy said.

“I am Harold the Elf.” Harold said, covering his mouth with his hand to help control his laughter.

Billy looked around the room in a daze, his eyes finally falling on his letter to Santa.

“You’re one of Santa’s elves?” Billy asked.

“Yep.” Harold said.

“How did you get here?” Billy asked.

“I walked.” Harold replied.

“From the North Pole?” Billy asked.

“Yep.”

“Oh....Wow. That must have been a long walk.”

“Yep.” Harold said. “Do you believe yet?”

“Do I have a choice?” Billy asked.

“Well, sure. Everyone has a choice of what they want to believe in. If you don’t believe in something then you certainly can’t ever know if it exists, so you will never be able to prove to yourself or anyone else something does or doesn’t exist unless you first believe that it must. Does that make sense?”

“No.” Billy said.

“Okay. In order to see something with your own eyes, you must first believe that it is there. If you don’t first believe something exists then you will never be able to see it. It’s that easy. If you believe that Santa exists then you can see him, you can see me. If you don’t believe that he exists you won’t be able to ever see that he does. You can hear my voice because you sort of believe, but not entirely that I exist.”

“I believe.” Billy said, and in the twinkling of an eye, Harold sat before him grinning like a child on Christmas morning.

Billy reached out and pinched Harold on the arm.

“Ouch!” Harold yelled and pinched him back.

“Ouch!” Billy yelled.

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Up in Pole Valley Santa’s laugh could be heard echoing throughout the entire valley.

“Put Billy Christianson back on the list!” He yelled.

The valley then exploded into cheers from the elves.

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“So what do you want for Christmas, Billy?” Harold asked.

Billy smiled and said “I don’t want anything, but I made a list.”

Harold looked at him strangely and muttered “You don’t want anything, but you made a list of things you don’t want?”

Billy grinned and said “That’s right!” then handed the list to Harold.

When Harold read the list, his smile faded from his face.

“Billy, we can’t perform miracles. This is not something we can do.”

Within an instant Harold vanished for Billy once again stopped believing.

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Up in Pole Valley, an unhappy Santa scratched Billy’s name from the list once more.

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The day before Christmas Eve, Billy sat at the table and cried while his mother tossed and turned in the grips of a horrible illness. Harold sat with him, feeling just as sad, because Billy would not believe in him again. In Billy’s hand was a crumpled letter to Santa Claus.

“I wish you would believe again, Billy.” Harold said, even though Billy couldn’t hear him.

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“Harold,” Santa thought to himself, knowing exactly what had happened in Billy’s cabin, “you have to believe in miracles also, otherwise we can’t exist.”

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Harold sat there, knowing he had failed in his mission, knowing that he would never be able to go home, when the bitter wind blew the door open and rushed into the cabin. Billy jumped up and wrestled with the door while the wind fought her way inside.

Harold closed his eyes and said simply “I believe, Santa. I believe.”

The door slammed shut and when Harold opened his eyes, Billy was gone.

Harold jumped up and ran outside to follow him, but Billy had disappeared in the falling snow. Harold kicked a snow drift, and wandered down the road towards the Langley house.

Harold entered the house and went in search of Sarah. Perhaps Billy had come here for a visit. He found her sitting by the fire, humming to herself, and sewing a shirt.

“Hello, Sarah.” Harold said.

Sarah looked up in surprise and said “Hello. Who are you?”

“I’m Harold the Elf.”

“Hi Harold. What are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be up in the North Pole?”

“Yes. But I came here to talk to Billy.”

“Because he doesn’t believe in Santa Claus?”

“Yep.” Harold said.

“It’s because of me.” Sarah said.

“What do you mean, Sarah?” Harold asked.

“When I had my accident, Billy asked Santa to fix everything and make me better, like I used to be. But I guess he couldn’t.”

“No, we can’t do anything like that.” Harold said.

“I know.” Sarah said with great disappointment. “I asked for legs too, but as you can see I still don’t have any. But I still believe, Harold. I still believe that one day I will walk through the wheat in the summer when it is as high as my waist. And I still believe that one day I will be able to go outside and fall backwards in the snow and make a dozen snow angels. I believe in miracles, Harold, I do.”

“But we’re not miracle workers, Sarah.” Harold said, wishing for all the world that he could give her new legs.

“You don’t have to be a miracle *worker*, Harold. You just have to believe in miracles.” Sarah said.

Harold stared off in wonder at the wisdom this little girl had just shared with him. “Of course!” Harold said in astonishment. “Of course you are right!”

Harold jumped up and left without saying good-bye. He had to get a message to Santa.

Running through the snow Harold leapt into the and shouted “I believe!”

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While Harold was having his conversation with Sarah, Billy was standing in line at the general store, waiting to see Santa. He could tell that Santa was tired, and he watched as a child yanked his long white beard. Billy ignored the whispers and the pointing as people made jokes of his appearance. He didn’t care. He was here for a higher purpose.

He believed in miracles.

When it came time for Billy’s turn to sit in Santa’s lap, he walked up with his head held high and his shoulders back, even when one of the townspeople yelled out “Hey Billy! Aren’t you a little old to be sitting in Santa’s lap. You gonna ask him for some new clothes?”

Billy ignored this man and handed Santa a very short list of things he wanted for Christmas, then he walked away.

On his way out of the store he brushed passed Harold. Their eyes met and Billy smiled. Harold returned his smile.

When Santa finally returned home after a long day of hearing Christmas wishes and getting his beard pulled all day long, he remembered the list he hadn't had a chance to read. He pulled it from his pocket and smiled as he read it.

"Put Billy Christianson *back on the list!*" he yelled, and a cheer split the silence of Pole Valley.

Santa turned the list over to his head elf, Morgan, and gave him instructions on exactly what to do. Morgan and the other elves got to work immediately. There was very little time as it was almost Christmas Eve.

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On Christmas morning Billy awoke earlier than usual and rolled over to find that sometime during the night Santa had decorated a grand Christmas Tree and left many presents beneath it. Billy started to cry. The things he found beneath the tree were things that were not on his list.

He checked on his mother to find that she was sleeping easily, and he snuck outside to go for a walk. He walked for hours and hours lost in his misery. Once again, he felt that Santa had let him down, and yet despite his unhappiness something inside of him refused to stop believing in miracles.

By the time Billy headed towards home the sun had risen turning everything into a shiny, white fairytale land. He guessed it was around nine in the morning and late enough to go and wish the Langley's a Merry Christmas.

When he neared their house the door opened and Billy saw in the doorway, his first miracle, and he saw that perhaps Santa really had granted him his Christmas wishes.

Sarah stood on shaky legs, while her mother sobbed happy tears behind her, helping her balance on new legs. Billy ran up to Sarah and looked down at her legs.

"How?" Billy asked in amazement.

"Their wooden!" Sarah said, smiling so brightly that the sun was captured in her eyes. "Feel them!" Sarah cried.

Billy knocked softly on her legs and looked up at her and smiled.

“Should we go make some snow angels?” He asked and Sarah answered with an excited nod.

Billy helped her balance as she learned to use her new legs. Sarah told him about the wooden supports that went up her thighs and strapped around her them holding the legs in place and enabling her to walk. Billy smiled with joy for her, because she got her Christmas wish. The entire day they spent falling back in the snow, making snow angels all day long.

He had never had so much fun in one day. He glanced over towards the end of the day to see a figure in the distance leaning against a tree. He didn't have to wonder who it was, because he knew it was Harold.

Billy waved and Harold waved back, then vanished. Harold's job was now done.

The sun was setting as Billy headed towards home. He arrived to find his mother up and about, the bloom of health evident in her cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes.

“Did you have a nice day?” His mother asked brightly.

Billy nodded. “You're feeling okay?” He asked.

“Never better. I just woke up this morning and felt like I had never been sick, then I opened the curtain and what do I see but a cupboard full of food and presents beneath the tree. I thought I was dreaming.”

Billy smiled and said “So did I. Do you believe in Santa Claus, momma?”

She smiled and said “I do now. A friend of yours stopped by, Harold, said he wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas, and to let you know that Santa got your list, and your final wish is on the way.”

Billy looked at her in confusion because he had only written two things down on the letter he sent to Santa and they had both already come true. Sarah had her legs, and his mother was healthy.

“What did he mean by that, Billy?” She asked.

“I have no idea, momma.”

While his mother baked and bustled around in the kitchen, Billy stood at the sparkling clean window and stared out watching the setting sun. The smells of turkey, and yams, potatoes and green beans filled the small room, and the roaring stove made it nice and cozy.

“Billy will you set the table?” His mother asked. Billy turned away from the window and set three places, just like he had for the past year with the hopes that his father would be home.

When dinner was ready he and his mother sat down to eat, each quietly thankful for the miracles they had experienced that day.

As they finished their meal, the door blew open and Billy looked up to see his father standing in the doorway.

“Dad!” Billy yelled, and both Billy and his mother jumped into his waiting arms.

“You’re home! You’re home!”

The Christianson family stood wrapped in each other arms for countless moments crying and talking at the same time. Harold watched the reunion from a distance and smiled, knowing now his job was really done. Billy’s final wish, one even he had forgotten about had come true.

Billy’s father had come home for Christmas.