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THE CHRISTMAS BOX by Dave Hawkins

a story for anyone who truly wants to believe

It was getting quite close to Christmas and for someone like Alyssa it should have been a very exciting time. She was out shopping with her parents and she was showing her younger brother, Dylan, all the wonderful things that there were to see. "Look up there, Dylan," she was saying, "See how the fairy lights are flashing." But Dylan wasn't interested in the lights. He was trying to see past the crowds of people to the far end of the shopping centre. "Don't you like the pretty lights?" asked Alyssa. Dylan just shook his head and said: "Santa."

Alyssa noticed a toy shop and dragged her brother towards it so that they could look in the window. But Dylan pulled back and wanted to keep walking. "Don't you want to see all the new toys?" asked Alyssa. Once again, Dylan shook his head. "Santa," he said, pointing ahead.

"He wants to see Father Christmas," explained their mother. "You do too, don't you?" she asked Alyssa. The little girl didn't answer straight away, so her father said: "We thought you liked coming to see Santa Claus at Christmas. You always used to."

Alyssa thought for a moment and then decided to tell her parents what was on her mind. "I did," she answered, "Until I found out that Santa isn't real."

Her parents looked quite shocked. "Who told you a thing like that?" asked her mother, sounding a little upset.

"The kids at school," said Alyssa. "They reckon only babies believe in Santa Claus." As if agreeing with her, young Dylan gave a big smile and said: "Santa."

"You see," said Alyssa, "It's all right for kids like Dylan, but I'm seven and a half and I'm too old to believe in things that aren't real."

As they carried on walking, Dylan was getting more excited, whereas Alyssa was quite the opposite. She really did want to keep on believing in Christmas and Santa Claus and all those other things because it made the time of year really special; but the kids at school seemed so sure that they were just a load of fairy stories. The other problem was that her parents must have known this all along, but for some reason they seemed upset that she had found out. One thing was certain - she

wasn't going to spoil Christmas for the whole family just because she had stopped believing. "Don't worry," she said in a whisper, "I won't tell Dylan. When we get to Father Christmas, I'll pretend to believe in him."

Alyssa kept her promise. When they arrived at Santa's sleigh in the middle of the shopping mall, she tried very hard to appear as excited as Dylan. She held his hand as they stood in the line of children waiting to see Santa; and each time the line moved closer, she would say: "Only four to go, Dylan, then it will be your turn." And she would add: "Remember - you have to be good, otherwise Santa won't bring you what you want for Christmas."

"Santa," said Dylan pointing, his eyes sparkling with glee. "Santa here."

"Yes," said Alyssa a little sadly, "Santa is here." And although she wouldn't let her little brother know, she couldn't bring herself to believe that the real Santa Claus was here, or anywhere.

Dylan went up to see Father Christmas first. He sat on Santa's lap, pulled his beard and chattered away as if he really believed, which he did. But Alyssa knew that the children at school must be right - it was just an ordinary man in a Santa suit. Even so, when her brother came running back with his present, she still didn't let on that it was all make-believe.

Then it was Alyssa's turn. She tried to remember how she felt last Christmas when she was only six and a half, and she hoped she walked in that bouncy, happy way. But the man in the Santa suit must have noticed something not quite right because, as soon as she was perched on his lap, he leaned close and said quietly: "This is a very kind thing you are doing and I'm proud of you."

At first, Alyssa didn't understand, until the man added: "I know you are only pretending to believe in me for the sake of your little brother and your parents."

"How could you possibly know that?" asked Alyssa in surprise.

The man's red lips smiled through his beard. "I just know," he said. "Children believe, but when they start growing up, they stop believing. It really is quite a pity."

Alyssa was getting a bit confused. She had always been told to tell the truth, yet here was an adult who seemed disappointed when children stopped believing in fairy tales which everyone knew were made up. "But you're not real," she said.

The man felt around his big stomach and tugged at his beard. "That's odd," he said, "I feel real."

"What I meant," said Alyssa, "Is that you're not Santa Claus. You're just an ordinary man dressed up in a costume."

"You may well be right," said the man. "And if it's the truth, as you say it is, maybe we should tell *them*." He nodded over Alyssa's shoulder at the line of waiting children.

She turned to see a mass of smiling, happy faces. Just beyond were her parents with her little brother who was still excited after his meeting with Santa. She turned back to the man. "No, we mustn't tell them," she said, "It would spoil their Christmas."

The man seemed quite concerned. "But wouldn't that be like telling fibs?" he asked.

"Of course not," replied Alyssa. "We wouldn't tell them *anything*. We'll just let them keep on believing in Santa Claus."

"So," said the man, stroking his beard thoughtfully, "The plan is for me to sit here pretending to be Santa, and you won't tell anyone that I'm just an ordinary person in a red suit."

"That's it," said Alyssa, quite proud of herself. "Then everybody's happy."

"As they should be," said the man straightening up. "And it will be our secret. Now, we have to remember that they are all watching us, so I'd better give you your present." He leaned over and put a hand in his sack. "What would you really like for Christmas, Alyssa?"

Alyssa suddenly felt quite strange. "How did you know my name?" she asked. "I'm sure I didn't tell you."

The man smiled broadly. "A lucky guess. Let me make another - what you would really like is to believe in Santa Claus like you used to." The little girl just sat there blinking, wondering how he could possibly know what she was thinking. "Of course," he continued, "That is the kind of gift you can only give to yourself, but I do have something for you that might help."

It must have been Alyssa's imagination, but she was sure she saw something glittering in the man's eyes. It was like looking into a pair of those Christmas ornaments that you shake to make the snow fall inside a plastic dome. When she blinked, the man's eyes were back to normal and he was handing her a small coloured box with a lid. "Inside this little box is your belief in Christmas," he said. "If you truly no longer believe in me, open it anytime; but if you wish to believe again, wait until you are alone on Christmas Eve, then take the lid off very carefully. It is my special Christmas present to you."

Alyssa wasn't at all sure about this. It sounded like a trick; but the man in the Santa suit had been very nice so far, if a little strange, so she didn't want to be rude. "Can I show the rest of my family my present?" she asked, then added: "After I've opened it on my own, of course."

"Well, I don't know about *showing* them," he said, "That might be a bit difficult. You could always tell them about it, I suppose, but then again ... It will probably be best if you decide for yourself at the time."

What a peculiar thing to say. In fact, he hadn't really said anything at all that she

could understand, and that made her very curious about what was in the box. Climbing off his knee, she said: "Thank you for the present, and for the talk. I've never met a Father Christmas like you before."

The man in the Santa suit held his large stomach in both hands and bobbed up and down as he began to laugh. "Ho, ho, ho! Oh, yes you have. Six times, by my count. But you were probably too young to remember."

Yes, he really was a very strange man. Alyssa waved as she started back to her family. "Have a happy Christmas," she called back over her shoulder.

"I will if you will," said the man in the Santa suit, still laughing. "Oh, by the way," he added, "I prefer strawberry milk with my shortbread."

Alyssa hurried back to her family. As soon as he saw the little box his sister was carrying, Dylan wanted to open it, but Alyssa said no. "I have to wait until Christmas Eve," she explained, "And I have to do it on my own, Santa said so."

"I thought you'd stopped believing in Santa?" said her father.

Alyssa shrugged. "Maybe I have and maybe I haven't. I'm still thinking about it." Then she took her brother's hand as they walked back to the car.

Next day was her last day at school. The other children tried teasing her about Father Christmas, but she didn't seem to mind any more. It was as if she suddenly knew something that they didn't; something that made her special. And when, instead of arguing with them, she just laughed, it made her feel quite grown-up; especially when they stopped trying to tease and went away to annoy someone else. Her own friends, of course, wanted to know what had come over her - she seemed so different to yesterday. Alyssa put on a smile like the man in the Santa suit and replied: "I met someone, someone quite strange, and very special." And that was all she would say about her visit to the man in the Santa suit.

The days leading up to Christmas were busy. The decorations were already up, but Dylan and Sasha, the cat, kept pulling things off the tree and it was Alyssa's job to put them back. Then there was baking to help with - sausage rolls, mince pies and the all-important shortbread.

The confusing part was the presents. They made believing in Santa Claus almost impossible. The way Alyssa saw it, if Father Christmas was supposed to bring them, how come Mum and Dad bought them at the shops and hid them in their wardrobe? Her mother tried to explain that people giving gifts to each other was the same as people bringing gifts to the baby Jesus. "I know about the three wise men," said Alyssa, "But what about Father Christmas? Isn't he supposed to bring presents too?"

Her father stepped in and said: "He does, Alyssa, but the gifts he brings are rather special. They are the kind that makes a person feel good inside, and they aren't always those things you can buy in shops."

"Like special presents?" she asked, thinking about her little coloured box, "For only you and no-one else?" Her parents didn't answer. They just nodded and smiled at each other. And Alyssa was sure she saw a tear in the corner of her mother's eye.

On Christmas Eve, Dylan refused to go to bed early, so Alyssa got to stay up late. Normally she would have been glad, but that night was different. She had been waiting all week to open the box. Once or twice she had almost opened it, but had managed to stop herself. She truly did want to start believing in Santa Claus again. So, there was nothing else for it but to play with Dylan until he got so tired that he fell asleep on the floor.

Her young brother was put to bed and Alyssa was just about to go to her own room when she was reminded that they hadn't put out a snack for Santa. Her mother smiled and added: "I know you've stopped believing, but we can still do it for Dylan's sake, can't we?"

The fact that Dylan had already gone to bed made it all seem quite pointless; but there was a strange look in her mother's eye and Alyssa had a feeling that she wasn't the only one in the family who wanted to keep believing in Santa. "Let's do it for everyone who wants to believe," said Alyssa, and she raced off into the kitchen.

She put an extra piece of shortbread on the plate. Then she poured a glass of milk and took out the strawberry flavouring. Noticing the puzzled look on her mother's face as she stirred in the pink powder, Alyssa said: "It's all right - Santa likes strawberry milk."

"How do you know that?" asked her mother.

"I just know," replied Alyssa, taking the plate and glass into the family room.

She said goodnight and went to brush her teeth, trying to do it properly, but really wanting to rush. Then she walked ever-so slowly to her room as if she wasn't bothered about going to bed. But once the door was closed behind her, she rushed for the desk. There, sitting on her Christmas-Stories book was the little coloured box. She seemed to remember putting it down so that the red side faced to the front. But that was now at the back and the green side was facing forward. Maybe her mother had turned it round.

Alyssa suddenly had a terrible thought - what if her mother had taken off the lid and looked inside? The way the man in the Santa suit talked about the present, it might only work the once and never again. There was only one way to find out. She tried to be brave as she reached out. As her fingers touched the lid, she had another

thought - what if the gift was just ordinary, like a hair comb or a packet of balloons? Would that mean that the magic part had already gone, or that there was no such thing as magic either? She really wanted to believe - in magic and Santa Claus. She really did!

Perhaps, she thought, it was better just to believe without having any proof and not open the box at all. She started moving her fingers away from the lid. That was when she heard the voice. At first she thought it was her father calling, but she could hear him talking quietly to her mother in the other room, so it couldn't have been him. And this voice sounded so much like the man in the Santa suit. "Who's that," she whispered, a little afraid.

"You know who I am, Alyssa," said the voice in such a gentle, friendly way that Alyssa stopped being frightened. "By the way," continued the voice, "Thank you for the strawberry milk. I'm really looking forward to it."

"Santa?" she whispered, afraid to even think that it was. It couldn't be, could it? Alyssa looked around the room, but there was nowhere anyone could hide; certainly no-one as large as the man in the Santa suit. No, it couldn't be him: that was silly. She checked her CD player, but it was turned off, so the sounds couldn't have been coming from there. She looked out of the window in case it was one of her friends from school hiding in the garden playing a trick on her. But there was no sign of anyone outside.

"Where are you?" asked Alyssa.

"I'm here with you," said the voice.

"But I can't see you," said Alyssa, becoming a little confused.

"Does it matter?" said the voice. "As long as you believe in me, I'm real enough to you. And you already know what I look like."

"Yes, Santa," said Alyssa, "Everybody does."

"So, I'm not just an ordinary man in a red suit?" the voice asked.

"Much more than that," replied Alyssa, "To me you are, anyway."

"That's what I wanted to hear," said Santa's voice. "Well, I can't stay here chatting all night. You aren't the only one who still believes in me, you know."

"Aren't you going to stay while I open my present?" she asked, a bit disappointed.

Santa laughed. "Not much point. I already know what it is."

"Will I like it?" she said. Santa didn't reply, but Alyssa heard his jolly laugh fading away into the night. Then she was alone again.

Alone! That meant she could open the present. This time she was certain that she wanted to. As for what she might discover, that was a different matter. Carefully, she reached out and caught hold of the lid. Raising it a little bit at a time, she leaned forward ready to look in. The lid was off. She leaned closer. Her head

was almost over the box when something burst from it and shot high into the air!

Alyssa jumped back and stared. Floating down from the ceiling were hundreds of sparkles which tinkled like tiny bells as they fell. She thought they might be stars until one dropped onto her hand, then another. At first they tickled, then they felt cold and wet as they started to melt. Some had settled on her sleeve and on the desk and she was able to see them for a bit longer before they too disappeared. "Snowflakes!" she whispered to herself in amazement. "It's snowing in my room!"

Suddenly, Alyssa felt the way she really wanted to feel - the way she remembered feeling last Christmas and all the other Christmases before she had started growing up. And yet, as good as they were, none of those times were as wonderful as this one. She couldn't help herself and began dancing around under the falling snow, singing and laughing. "We wish you a Merry Christmas, we wish you a Merry Christmas"

All of a sudden she heard a sound and turned to see the door opening. Alyssa stood like a statue, her mouth open and her arms high in the air. "What *are* you doing?" asked her mother as she came in. Then she saw the open box on the desk. "Ah, I see," she said with a little smile, "You've opened your present."

Alyssa couldn't believe this. There she was, not outside, but in her room with snow falling all around her, and there was her mother talking as if it was nothing. "Isn't it truly amazing?" said Alyssa.

"Well, I can't really say, dear," said her mother, "Not until you show me."

"*Show* you?" said Alyssa screwing up her face so that her glasses slipped down to the end of her nose.

"Your present, darling," explained her mother, "The one Santa ... er, I mean, the one the man in the Santa-suit gave you."

"Oh, the present," said Alyssa as she started to realise something. It was very clear now that her mother couldn't see the snow at all. This was a special present for her alone. "If you can't see it," said Alyssa, "I can't show it to you. All I can tell you is that it is truly wonderful."

Her mother frowned and said: "I'm not quite sure I understand, but as long as you're happy with it."

Alyssa laughed. "Oh, I am, Mum. Happier than I've ever been at Christmas, at any time."

"I'm glad," said her mother as she started to leave. "Don't stay up too late." She smiled and added: "Otherwise Santa might not come."

Alyssa almost told her mother that Santa had already been, but she thought it best not to say anything. It wouldn't have been fair. After all, grown-ups liked to think that they knew everything; but, being as old as they were, they had forgotten how to believe in magical things like Santa Claus. And Santa had been right - it was

a pity: people who stopped believing were missing out on the best part of Christmas.

With this decided, Alyssa went back to playing with the snow which only she could see. Well, that wasn't quite true. There were probably lots of others around who probably could, but they weren't here; and as they were only kids, who would ever believe them?