

CHRISTMAS, VERSION 1.2

*Geschrieben während meines Erasmus-Aufenthaltes in Manchester,
kurz vor Weihnachten 2003.*

Looking back for a moment I watch the footprints I have just left in the snow slowly filling again in the permanent onrush of glistering icy crystals. Soon, I think, turning around again and walking on, there will be nothing visible left, everything covered under that uniform white blanket; but not gone, just sleeping, dreaming, waiting, because once a print has been made it has changed everything and forever.

Wish list to the Christkind – Chris, age 7

- Rollerskates
 - the yellow plane from telly, but a little one
 - a cat! (please don't tell mummy, she would be upset)
- P.S.: My brother is always mean to me. Can you do something?

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When I was a child there was no Santa Claus. Or at least I didn't take any notice of him. I grew up in a small village in the (Austrian) countryside, and the ingenuity of American marketing professionals who managed to turn a two-day Christian holiday into a two-month sales extravaganza hadn't reached us yet; not then, and not there. Instead, there was the Christkind – a child Jesus – with golden curly hair and benevolent eyes and smile who was supposed to bring the presents for all the children who had been good during the past year. It was traditional to write a wish list, and then either give it to the parents who promised to pass it on, or leave it on the outer windowsill, for the Christkind to magically pick it up directly (And indeed, what magical powers he must have had, being able to read those letters in spite of them being soaked after a night lying out in the snow!)

Perhaps I had imagined this infant Jesus to look like he did on those intricate drawings in childrens' books. Still, in my mind it actually was rather something of a vague idea – a blurred figure of light and colour with something inexplicably beautiful about it, like frost slowly growing on the window, its crystal structure catching the early winter sunlight and projecting little dancing stars into my bedroom. But I just couldn't imagine what his voice would sound like. So one December day I decided that I had to resort to more ruthless scientific methods to satisfy my curiosity: I would hide under the living room sofa when the Christkind was supposed to bring the presents on the evening of the 24th. This, in order to make it more immediate and dramatic for us children (I guess) was always to be only a moment before we were allowed to enter the living room and see them. Of course my father used to say the Christkind could only do his job if it wasn't disturbed (or even seen), but I was 7 years old and couldn't even spell the word 'consequences', let alone truly grasp the concept.

And I was naughty. So I planned to secretly watch him, and if I felt brave enough, talk to him (perhaps he would appreciate some company after all, I thought, he must be very lonely delivering all those parcels on its own).

This endeavour was bound to encounter at least two logistic problems: my parents. The usual procedure was that while we were waiting outside in front of the door my father would go into the living room (the door, made partly of glass, had been covered with a blanket) to see if the Christkind had already been there, then he would sound a little bell which was only used once a year and only for this occasion (oh how my brother and I loved and longed for that special sound!) to signal to us that everything was alright and we could come and join him in front of the Christmas tree. – Sometimes I wondered whether he ever got to see the Christkind, or at least catch a glimpse of him hurrying out the door to the balcony, turning his curly head and possibly winking back at him with a knowing smile. – I knew the ritual, and loved it dearly, but now I had to find some way to sneak in myself, at some point between us coming home from church in the late afternoon and my father going into the living room. I spent countless evenings with my flashlight under my blanket, secretly devising my plan. I felt like as if was very ingenious.

Finally Christmas Eve had come, and I was ready. When we reached our flat after church, and while my father, mother, brother and grandparents, all red-faced from the cold, were trying to get rid of all the snow on coats and boots, I hurriedly got out of my thick winter clothes and dropped them right there on the floor, pretending having to go to the toilet very urgently. I had everything prepared, since my cover had to be perfect: with a red permanent ink pencil I quickly coloured the little white tab below the toilet door handle that indicated whether it was locked and turned on the light and air circulation unit inside (which made quite a noise), then rushed on into the living room, opening and closing the door as quietly as I could. For a moment I had to wait and catch my breath. My heart was pounding like mad. It was almost dark in here, and my eyes had to get used to the eerie light coming from outside, a glimmering blue-white reflected from the snow-covered lawn, the Christmas tree painting strange shadows into every corner of the room. Then, growing a bit calmer, I crouched down onto the floor and crawled under the huge sofa (well, it wasn't really huge, but I was quite small back then I guess). Then all I could do was wait and hope. In another flash of ingenuity I cursed myself for not having taken a camera with me.

Soon I heard my father's voice nearing the door. As usual, he was telling the rest of the family to wait while he was going to check the living room. A moment later I could see his feet coming through the door which he only opened wide enough for him to barely fit through. I panicked. I feared I had been too late, because as soon as my father entered, everything was supposed to be – if only recently – finished already! But as he closed the door behind him and switched on the light, I could see that there were no presents lying under the tree yet. For a moment I was puzzled. Then I thought, *oh, the Christkind is just late and father would simply wait for him this time!* So it's OK to see him after all! I almost sighed aloud with relief. Then I concentrated on looking over to what I could see of

the balcony door, expecting it to open any moment. Or would it come through the window? But nothing of the sort happened. Instead, I heard my father rustle some keys, then open one of the big closets, with a distinctive click of the small padlock. *What is he doing?* Next I saw his feet moving again, towards the tree on the other side of the room, and suddenly his hands appeared, and in them a pile of parcels which he carefully set onto the floor. Again the feet walking over to the closet, again a moment there, then back and again the hands and more parcels. My mind was racing. *What is happening here? Where is the Christkind? Why were all the presents already there, locked in that cabinet?* But I was ripped out of my thoughts by a sudden thud above me. My father had stepped onto the sofa to get the Christmas bell from where it was hidden all year on the topmost shelf. He got it, climbed back down, lit the candles on the tree, then switched off the light and opened the door. He called for my mother to ask whether I had come out of the toilet yet. She said no and he knocked on the door, asking whether everything was alright and telling me that the Christkind had been there and we could start. For a moment I wished I actually had been sitting in there, although it doesn't seem to be a very dignified thing to do while you expect God's son rushing around your home.

You should have seen the look on his face when he finally turned and saw me standing in the open living room door. And more importantly, you should have seen the look on my face. The special Christmas bell jingled as usual, but this time because my father had dropped it on the floor in surprise.

Wish list for Christmas to Mum and Dad – Chris, age 8

- a pair of inlineskates (normal rollerskates are so yesterday, I tell you)
- a new football
- the “Secret of Monkey Island” computer game
- two or three of the new “Schreckenstein”-books
- please please please I want a cat I think the doctor is stupid I'm not allergic!!

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Many years later I had gradually become quite a fan of that two-month sales extravaganza, ever since I had moved from the peaceful countryside to the second-biggest city for my studies and then my job. I wasn't quite sure whether other children of today still believed in the Christkind, had been converted to Santa Claus or probably even Harry Potter, it didn't matter: for me the Christmas holiday season, apparently starting earlier each year, was a time of indulging in all those glittering lights, kitschy window decorations and festive spirit caught somewhere between folklore and capitalism. For several weeks it would feel like having bits of Disneyland scattered everywhere through the snow-covered streets and frosted-glass windowed shops of the city. The very nature of its comforting artificiality sometimes made my heart pound with joy similar to when I had been standing in the dark living room that night long ago.

Nevertheless, and even though I wasn't a particularly religious person, I wanted to enable my own daughter as long as possible to keep up that wonderful innocent belief in a Christmas that meant more than just getting presents and having a tree standing around in your living room. At the age of 6 Anna had grown to be a dreamy yet vivacious and inquisitive young person, and already some years earlier I had decided to make sure that Christmas Eve was going to be a very special night for her.

The ritual would be similar to the one I had grown up with, but moving with the times I had made some personal modifications – Christmas Version 1.2, in a way. First of all, as soon as my pregnant wife and I had moved into our new house, I also got a living room door with a big glass window, intending to cover it with a slightly translucent blanket on each Christmas day. But – since I knew my daughter's curiosity – I made sure that it was locked as soon as we were finished decorating the tree around lunch time each year, and only I was to go inside and secretly put the presents under the tree a bit later. Secondly, and this is where tradition finally met technology, I bought a special light (probably having belonged to a stylish disco's furnishings once) with a timed power plug, which I would then set to be activated for about ten seconds at the exact moment when I knew we were all standing outside the door waiting “for the Christkind to come.”

When it was time, I would turn out all the other lights in the house, keeping only one candle lit in the hallway leading to the living room, where we were waiting. It was a magnificent and mysterious sight, never failing to excite our little girl: bluish, softly pulsating light pouring through the blanket over the door, leaving everyone holding their breath because it sure looked as if something magical was going on inside. When it was over, I would tell my family to wait, then I would go to the door, unlocking and opening it carefully, glimpsing back at Anna's eagerly glowing face, get inside and hide the light. Then I would quickly light the candles on the tree and finally it was for me to sound a little bell for the others to come in.

This year it should be just like all the others before. Anna had just turned 7, and still deeply believed in the Christkind coming to our house bringing presents and good wishes for all. Once more we – my daughter, my wife, my mother and father – were standing in the hallway only with one candle lit, me secretly glancing at my watch, knowing that the magical Christkind lightshow was supposed to start in about one minute's time. Anna was quivering with anticipation, claspng her mother tightly by the hand. The seconds ticked away, only three to go, two, one...

Nothing happened. I had to choke a gasp of surprise. *What's going on?* Had I set the light for the wrong time? But I had double-checked it only a few hours ago... The others were still waiting, all of them except my daughter looking anxiously at me when I turned to face them, realizing that something did not go according to the plan. I was getting increasingly nervous, watching Anna as she, too, having no idea what was really going on, seemed to grow impatient. For a moment time seemed to be flying, and I had no idea what to do.

“Maybe the Christkind can’t find our house? There’s an awful lot of snow outside. I could sing ‘Silent Night’ so that he can hear us!” Anna suddenly burst out and shuffled forward, looking at the dark door and then at me.

“Yes, yes, that’s a good idea darling” I quickly said, crouching down to her and embracing her around the waist. *Anything to give me time to think.* “Why don’t you just start?”

She did, singing as forceful as she dared, eyes fixed upon the door with anticipation. *Think, there’s got to be some reason, you’ve got to do something...* I was desperate, and time seemed to be racing, out of my control. Suddenly she stopped singing.

“Look daddy, there it is! It heard me!” Her small arm outstretched, she pointed at the door.

And indeed, a light was coming from inside the living room, not looking quite the same as usual, but still, there it was.

“Can we go in now?” she said and started towards the door, tugging at my hand and dragging me along with her.

I was utterly confused, not knowing what to think. So I just followed her and unlocked the door. As we entered, I couldn’t believe my eyes: the candles were lit, the special light was gone, and the balcony door was slightly open. We stood there, gazing at the beautifully glittering tree. Then, suddenly, Anna turned towards the door leading to the hallway.

“Where’ve you been, granddaddy?”

“Oh, I had to go to the toilet very urgently, I hope the Christkind doesn’t mind.” he said as he walked in with traces of snow on his shoes which only I seemed to notice, handing me a broken light bulb behind my back with a smile and quickly hiding a big flashlight under the sofa.