

PEPPERMINT ANGEL

I remember my father driving my grandfather and me to the arena, in the frosty sparkle of the December night. My head was filled with visions of snowflakes, coloured lights and hockey pucks. All dancing together with the music from the radio. Tunes that were still fresh to me back then.

City sidewalks, busy sidewalks, dressed in holiday style,
In the air there's a feeling of Christmas...

It was a magic time. My virgin stick was packed with my hand-me-down skates, and tonight I had another crack at scoring my first goal. Or even becoming a split-second superstar. Other guys made it look so simple. Why shouldn't I get a break? Though stardom for me seemed like a long-shot, I could still fantasize.

Star of Wonder, Star of Light,
Let Earth receive her king!
Here comes Santa Claus...

Every song promised a miracle, and got me more excited. Tomorrow I was going to visit Santa in his castle at the mall. I hadn't made up my mind exactly what to ask for yet, but my Yuletide hopes were high. Anything was possible in the season of dreams.

"He shoots, he scores!" That's what hockey's all about. Grab your golden moments quick, before they tarnish and fade into rusty memories. I learned this powerful lesson first hand, when my chance of a lifetime opened up before me that night.

"Hey, the puck's beside my stick!"

"And the net's right there!"

"This is it. My first goal!"

"All I've gotta do is..."

"Hey! Ouch! Bernie, get out! Give it back! That's my puck!"

"We're on the same team, you idiot!"

"Oh no! He scored!"

"Bernie Grabowski scored my goal!"

"Look at them all patting him on the back."

"I hate you Bernie Grabowski. One day I'm going to get even."

"You'll see."

Bernie Grabowski. Big as a house. Dumb as an ox. In-your-face puck-hog. Thorn in my side when I was eight years old. And Professor Emeritus in my private School of Hard Knocks forever. Who lived by the Golden Rule, "Take advantage of others before they take advantage of you?" You got it. Bernie Snooze-Ya-Lose Grabowski.

Of course, I had no just cause to hate Bernie Grabowski's guts. Hockey is a dog-eat-dog game, and he was merely playing true to form. With the ferocity of a bloodhound. But in school, where we were in the same class, I was head and shoulders ahead of him in all academic subjects, even if he was six inches taller than I was. And so to my clever, misguided young mind, it seemed somehow unfair that Bernie Grabowski should be superior to me at anything, including sports. But if that was all there was to it, I think I could have accepted the fact that he was a better athlete, without holding it against him. Because deep down I knew that for him hockey

was a passion where success was vital, while for me it was largely a pastime. But I especially hated it when he made me look bad. Today wasn't the first occasion he had stolen the puck from my unsteady stick, and skated away in triumph. And so as I returned to the bench, cursing Bernie Puck-Head Grabowski with every swear-word I knew, my mind was searching for a suitable form of revenge. Death in a torture chamber. Or maybe a dungeon filled with poisonous snakes... In the dressing room after the game, I was still brooding over the most cheerful means for disposing of my arch-enemy.

I probably never knew which team won or lost the game, although I do recall my grandfather helping me pull off my skates. He was my peppermint grandfather, but everyone called him The Colonel. He'd been living with us for about a year, since my lavender grandmother had died, and he always came to watch me play. The Colonel was old and deaf, and a little forgetful. And his moustache tickled when he kissed me good-night. From what I remember, aside from having a different smell, my grandmother had been about the same. Funny thing, but my grandfather's peppermints didn't taste as good after she was gone.

"Congratulations on your assist out there, Soldier," The Colonel winked and slipped me a consolation peppermint. I suspect he called all his grandchildren "Soldier", so he wouldn't get their names confused.

"That wasn't an assist," I moped. "And it should have been my goal. Bernie Grabowski stole it from me. I hate Bernie. And I hate hockey, too." I glowered across the room, where Garbage-Goal-Grabowski was shouting and laughing with the rest of the team. I thought I heard someone call out my name, and I was afraid they were making fun of me.

My grandfather stopped unlacing my skate, and laid his hand on my shoulder. A sure sign he was going to tell me some of his poetry.

"If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you.
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you.
But make allowance for their doubting too,
You're a better man than I am, Soldier boy!"

The Colonel always used poetry when he wanted to speak from the heart. In fact, he always recited the same poem, and invariably had an uplifting verse to fit every occasion. But this time his words fell on unheeding ears, as I was too busy hatching desperate schemes against Bernie Grabowski to pay proper attention. And what little did sink in only fanned the flames of my discontent. For no one could ever live up to the perfection demanded in those lofty lines.

"Am I supposed to be an angel, or what?" I muttered the question into my scarf and kicked my feet in frustration, while my grandfather buckled up my boots. As soon as I had made the remark, I was expecting a brisk clip on the ear for my impertinence. But for some reason The Colonel just smiled. Thank goodness he was deaf. And forgetful.

During the ride home, my thoughts were a bitter stew of jealousy and rage, in which my frustration simmered to a slow boil.

He shoots, he scores!
You're a better man than I am, Puck-Head.
Am I supposed to be an angel, or what?

My mind seethed with futile plots against Bernie Grabowski, but none of them had any merit. My options seemed very bleak. Brute force was out of the question. I could never win on that front. A battle of wits? Get serious! Bernie was too stupid to know he and I were at war. I needed to change the rules of combat. Or find a secret weapon. But how? And then I was reminded by a couple of back-to-back Christmas hits on the radio, that this was the month when strange beings came to life, and impossible wishes could be granted.

Angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing...
 You'd better watch out, you'd better not cry,
 You'd better not pout, I'm telling you why,
 Santa Claus is coming to town!

Angels. Santa Claus. High fliers all. Apparently nothing lay beyond the imagination of a true believer. And my untested faith was solid as a rock. As these supernatural revelations mixed with my churning thoughts, I suddenly had an amazing idea. My inspiration was so incredible, it completely swept away my mental impasse, leaving a clear course of action. So by the time we pulled into the driveway, my worries were over and I had a sure-fire plan.

Tomorrow when I went to see Santa Claus, I would ask him for something special. And unique. Something, it seemed, no one had ever asked for before. I innocently reasoned that I'd been good all year, so he couldn't refuse my request. And when he gave me what I wanted - Bernie Grabowski watch out! Because from now on the hockey rink would be tilted in my favour. And I wasn't just going to get even, I was going to beat Bernie Grabowski at his own game. Yes! I could hardly wait.

The twenty minutes I spent alone on the drawbridge of Santa's castle, waiting for my turn on his lap, were about the most anxious moments I've ever endured. I was both exhilarated and terrified at once. For the gift I wanted would not just make me the best hockey player in the world. It would surely change my life. And that was pretty scary. But what if Santa Claus decided that I hadn't been good enough? Then my disappointment would be unbearable. I couldn't imagine he'd be so mean. But I'd never asked for anything this important before. Perhaps for the really momentous decisions Santa took behaviour more seriously into account. I knew he couldn't accuse me of any sin of consequence, but I'd heard a few stories about lumps of coal, which proved there was also a dark side to the all-powerful Saint Nicholas, and so my knees were shaking as I approached his throne.

With a long line of children waiting, Santa Claus came directly to the point. "What would you like for Christmas, Son?"

"Please Santa, Sir," I timidly replied, "I'd like a pair of wings."

"Wings, eh? You mean like an angel? With feathers and everything?" I wished he'd stop bellowing so everyone could hear, but I just nodded my head in silence. "Now why would you want something like that?"

I couldn't admit the wings were my secret anti-Grabowski-weapon. That wasn't in keeping with the Christmas spirit. So I just said, "I want to be a better hockey player." And hoped he couldn't read my mind.

"Hmmm," said Santa, peering over his glasses. "What size do you think would be best? Small, medium or large?"

Instantly my confidence jumped halfway to the moon. All right! He wasn't saying no! "Medium, I guess. As long as they're big enough so I can fly. Unless you think I might grow into the large ones."

"And what colour would you like, Son?" Santa Claus was asking all the right questions.

"White?" I was concerned that plumage of a different shade would make me look like some ridiculous bird.

"May I make a suggestion?" said Santa. "I think your wings should be invisible."

Invisible! Of course! Santa was a genius! I'd actually had some momentary misgivings about how silly I'd appear, flapping my feathery appendages like a giant fluttering albatross. But with invisible wings, no one would ever know. And my secret weapon could remain undetected forever. "Oh Santa, that would be perfect." I jumped from his knee and made my get-away without giving him a chance to cross-examine me on my character or conduct.

What a guy! Why had I been so afraid? Santa Claus was wonderful. Life was wonderful. My plans were falling into place. And soon it would be Christmas Day!

'Twas the night before Christmas. At last. For the past week or so, since my trip to Santa Claus, I'd been silently rhapsodizing about my invisible wings-to-be. I hadn't told my secret to anybody, not even The Colonel. When my older brother had asked what Santa was bringing me, I made up a story about a remote-controlled helicopter. One that really flew. He said there was no such thing. But how could my brother know what Santa and the elves could do? I reckoned if they could make reindeer fly, getting a toy helicopter off the ground should be easy. In fact, the reindeer themselves probably had invisible wings. Why hadn't I thought of that before?

For hours on end I had dreamed of the first hockey game of the new year, when I would spread my new wings, and go flitting across the blueline, my skates hardly touching the ice. With one fell swoop, I would descend on Bernie Grabowski, finesse the puck from his stick, and dippy-doodle off to score my first goal. After that, the scoring record would soon be mine. And my nemesis Bernie Grabowski would be history.

While musing over my impending superhuman powers, I had begun to realize the enormous opportunities that wings could offer, beyond just avenging my Grabowski vendetta. I longed eagerly, as only an eight-year-old could, to experience the joy of taking off at will, and the tremendous feeling of freedom flight would bring. I also figured I might have to eat more. Especially sweets. To keep up my strength and prevent myself from crashing from exhaustion.

I wondered if my wings would pop out full-size on Christmas morning, or if they would sprout slowly, and take weeks or months to grow in. And would I need special clothes with wing-holes? Or even flying lessons? But who could teach me? Oh, what glorious problems I was about to face!

But now it was time to prepare for Santa's arrival. The Colonel and I hung the empty stockings by the fireplace, and set out some milk and cookies, and carrots for the reindeer. Even though I was wide awake and greatly excited, for once I didn't complain about going to bed. If my wings were to burst out over night, I'd probably need plenty of rest. Like a caterpillar becoming a butterfly.

After saying my standard prayers, I added a confidential appeal to God and Baby Jesus, just in case Santa Claus needed a little help performing his miracle. I told God about my wings, but in order not to sound too presumptuous, I was quick to point out that I wasn't asking to be an angel, so I didn't need a halo, or a harp. Just wings. I considered telling God that I never wanted to be an angel, because I didn't want to be that nice all the time, but decided against it. It was about then I fell asleep.

As soon as I woke up on Christmas morning, I reached around behind my shoulders, to find out if "they" were there. The realization that everything felt the same as usual was naturally no cause for alarm. I guessed Santa had given me the "slow-grow" variety of wings. Or maybe they were so invisible, even I couldn't perceive them. To test these theories, I hippety-hopped down the hall stairs to see if my buoyancy had increased, but didn't notice any difference. Not to worry. However, I was curious to see what was under the tree.

Ironically, I received a comic book titled "The Emperor's New Clothes" in my stocking. But of course I wasn't yet worldly enough to interpret this as a divine omen. I just wanted to get on with the presents.

The Colonel was in charge of passing out the gifts. For better or for worse, he distributed the ones from Santa Claus first. When he gave me a conventional-looking gift-wrapped box, I tore it open in a second, and discovered a Lego set. It included all the components for an assemble-yourself helicopter kit. With a little motor to make the propeller blades spin. Batteries not included.

My first reaction was that it was some kind of joke. I looked around the room, but no one was laughing. So who else would be trying to trick me? Jolly old Saint Nick didn't have a warped sense of humour like that. Besides, I'd never mentioned a helicopter to Santa Claus, only to my brother. He might have told my parents. The rat. But why would they get involved? Nothing made sense. Still...

And then I knew. Santa was a fake! My parents were Santa Claus, which made them fakes too. There was no God. I would never have wings. Bernie Grabowski would always be a better hockey player.

"How do you like your helicopter, Soldier?" The Colonel's words halted my devastating train of thought.

"It's OK, I guess." I couldn't pretend enthusiasm.

"You'll like it better when it's all together. I'll give you a hand later," said The Colonel, bringing me another package.

"Santa Claus isn't real."

My grandfather didn't try to argue. "We looked high and low for a helicopter that could fly. This was the best we could do, Soldier." He wrapped my fingers around a peppermint. Then we opened my next present together. A brand new pair of skates. With a registration for power-skating lessons during the Christmas holidays tucked inside.

"There's no God, either." I had to confess my newly-acquired knowledge to someone.

The Colonel made himself room on the couch. When he'd sunk down beside me, he repeated in his raspy voice.

"If you can make one heap of all your winnings
 And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
 And lose, and start again at your beginnings
 And never breathe a word about your loss...
You're a better man than I am, Soldier Boy!"

And so I never did tell my grandfather about my wings.

The hockey season dragged on. And on. Eventually we reached the playoffs, but despite my new skates and a certificate for perfect attendance at power-skating school, I still hadn't scored a goal. Bernie Grabowski was convinced that his outstanding performance had led our team to post-season play. I happened to know that all teams of eight-year-olds made the playoffs, no matter what their record.

Then in the final game, with the score tied and a minute left to play, I was standing out of position, when one of Bernie Grabowski's slap-shots grazed my stick and went into the net, winning us the championship. Bernie Grabowski was furious. He threatened that if I ever got in the way of one of his shots again, he'd knock my block off. But a goal's a goal's a goal, and a split-second superstar's a split-second superstar. So after a major sigh of relief, I went crazy celebrating my conquest.

When The Colonel heard me boasting to my team-mates about my future NHL career, he carefully admonished.

"If you can dream - and not make dreams your master
 If you can think and not make thoughts your aim
 If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
 And treat those two imposters just the same,
You're a better man than I am, Soldier Boy!"

But I know my grandfather was proud of my success, unless his memory was failing more than usual. Because he kept feeding me peppermints for days afterwards.

When September arrived, I was afraid my parents would sign me up for hockey again. But happily the issue was never raised, and I was allowed to retire a minor hockey hero. I sold my Christmas skates, which I claimed to have out-grown, and used the money to buy more Lego. And batteries.

One day around Christmas, I was astonished when my teacher read my grandfather's poem to the class. After school, I rushed home, intent on asking The Colonel if he was Rudyard Kipling himself, or if he and the poet were just good friends. When I got there, however, I was told that my grandfather had suffered a stroke, and was in the hospital. I didn't know what a stroke was. But it sounded serious, and I was frightened.

I remember visiting the old man, lying on his hospital bed on Christmas Day. He was almost completely paralyzed, and it was quite a shock when I saw him. I didn't know what to say, or even if he could hear me, so I held his hand and quoted one of his familiar refrains.

"If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
 To serve your turn long after they are gone,
 And so hold on when there is nothing in you
 Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'"

You're a better man than I am, Soldier Boy"

My mother told me not to be so rude. Couldn't I see The Colonel was very sick? But I could tell from the way his eyes lit up as I spoke, and his twisted mouth tried to form the words as I went along, that I was doing the right thing. When I had done, with valiant gestures, he indicated for me to look in his jacket which hung across the room.

The first thing I removed from his pocket was a brass medal in the shape of a cross, with a tattered ribbon attached. Then a piece of paper with some fountain-pen scratches in the Colonel's handwriting. And finally I pulled out a handful of peppermints, with a little lace sachet that smelled of lavender. No wonder my grandfather's candies tasted funny!

I didn't appreciate it then, as I stood with my family at The Colonel's bedside, sucking on one of his musty mints, but I realize now that peppermint candy was one of the finest Christmas presents I ever received.

My grandfather pulled through pretty well that time, but of course he is now long departed. But I still carry his medal in my wallet along with a desperate-need peppermint. They lie in a hidden compartment which also holds the scrap of paper I took from the Colonel's pocket that Christmas, upon which is written in long-hand:

If you can fill the unforgiving minute
 With sixty seconds' worth of distance run
 Yours is the world and everything that's in it,
 And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!

I now know the old gentleman was reciting his verses as much for his own reassurance as for mine. But somehow that makes them more precious to me. It took courage to share his vulnerability like that. And I will always love my peppermint angel, the Colonel, for bestowing on me through his wisdom and treasures, the invisible wings for my journey through life, which Santa Claus and all the other mythic gods couldn't provide.

And so I've taken the liberty of adding a line to my grandfather's poem. On that crumpled paper below his spidery strokes, I have inscribed my own Kipling-style tribute.

"You're a better man than I am, Soldier Boy."

THANKS FOR READING PEPPERMINT ANGEL.

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