

Santa's Little Helper

I remember when I found out that Santa Claus was a big fat liar. Up until that moment I'd been told that Santa, that old, bearded, suspiciously God-looking figure of a man had brought everybody's presents and dreams down the chimney at Christmas, eaten a great big plate of cookies, drunk a big jug of milk and probably used the services a few times ... in the unluckiest houses. Rocketing round the world at breakneck speed, they said ... in a sleigh pulled by magic reindeer, they said ... he managed to deliver presents to roughly 2 billion children ... all in one short, magical Christmas night. It was, of course, a highly improbable and impractical proposition ... I knew all along, even when I was a little boy, that he must have been getting some help.

It was 2009, and I was in the Upper Austrian countryside for my first real Austrian Christmas with my girlfriend's (now wife's) family. It was all hyper-, über-Austrian, mega-traditional, there was snow ... everywhere. Big drifts of it. There was countryside ... everywhere. Big rolling fields of it. I met my girlfriend's grandparents for the first time and couldn't understand a word of their Upper Austrian Innviertler dialect. I just stood there smiling gormlessly and nodding. But there were Christmas cookies ... everywhere. And I rather took a fancy to the ones called Vanillekipferl. I didn't complain. It was all incredibly lovely.

However, upon walking into the family living room, I saw, to my great surprise and disappointment, that the tree was just standing there naked, no tinsel, no baubles, no alcoholic chocolates hanging just a little bit too high so that the little children can't reach them (no matter how many presents they stand on). There weren't any decorations around the room either ... and more importantly, I had no idea how Santa was going to fit through the Kachelofen in the corner!

Sausages as white as the snow outside on the fields were brought to the table. Big piles of them. Baskets of fresh semmels pressed down heavily on the tablecloth, with bowls of sauerkraut, sweet mustard, and freshly grated horseradish that made everyone's eyes water and set grandfather off on a coughing fit. At some point in the evening, grandfather slowly rose from the table, his eyes still streaming with tears from the horseradish, and promptly disappeared. He was gone for what seemed like hours. Maybe he'd had an accident or something? In my very bad German, I tried to ask if I should go and search for him on the toilet, or maybe he'd slipped on the ice and fallen into a snowdrift outside? Visions of a really sad Christmas flashed through my mind, with people giving speeches about the dangers of letting old age Austrian pensioners wander around in the snow in their slippers after Christmas dinner when they were highly likely to have been disoriented by freshly grated horseradish. I was jolted back to reality by the laughter that had erupted round the table as Grandma had just told the story about the Christmas when Grandfather had set the tree on fire. Nobody was bothered about the now long-missing, poor old granddad. Another white sausage was put in front of me and my eyes began to water again as the bowl of horse radish began making its way to my end of the table ... but I didn't complain, it was all still extremely lovely.

Suddenly the sound of a tiny little bell being rung drifted into the dining room and everyone dropped their white sausages in mid-peel. "The Christkind is here!" Exclaimed my girlfriend's youngest cousin, and with that we all poured into the living room to find the Christmas tree twinkling with candles and baubles and chocolates wrapped in shiny foil, and piles of presents under it and, thankfully, a very healthy grandfather sitting calmly on the sofa sipping a glass of Punsch and munching on a Vanillekipferl. As more cookies were brought in and the festivities got underway, I thought it a good idea, even though I had already had two glasses of Punsch by then, to try a little joke (but one of those jokes that has some genuine seriousness behind it), and asked, in my now even worse German, how Santa Claus had managed to climb down through the Kachelofen to deliver everyone's presents? Roars of laughter again. The joke had worked ... yes, there was no way he was going to fit. I knew it, and they knew it ... but now I needed answers.

"Santa Claus doesn't come to Austria," said my girlfriend's grandmother tilting her head at me as if I was 4 years old.

"Who brings the presents then?" I asked.

"Christkind brings them!" she said as she reached for another Vanillekipferl.

"Yes! Christkind brings them!" chimed in all my girlfriend's younger cousins as they excitedly searched for their name tags amongst the piles of presents under the tree.

Christ-kind? "Who could that be?" I wondered. I was pretty sure that the Messiah had never had children, that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were just good friends and all that 'holy grail' stuff was just silly conspiracy theory. But here, in Austria of all places, it seemed that the poor little offspring of Jesus was being forced to work over Christmas delivering everyone's presents! After the initial shock, and 3 more Vanillekipferl, I began to calmly assess the situation. "I guess it's no worse than forcing a retired old pensioner to dress up in a silly red and white costume and do it," I thought, and took a fourth Vanillekipferl.

And then it dawned on me, as the delightful cookie broke in half and crumbled down my Christmas jumper, all this time, Santa Claus had been outsourcing his business and getting the little Child of Christ to help him out with the deliveries! That's it! It must be! While Santa took all the credit everywhere else on the planet, in places like England and America, all the fame, interviews, Hollywood films and franchises, the poor Christkind, with no super-fast-flying sleigh pulled by magic reindeer and no team of industrious little elves to help him, was left all on his own to deliver presents to almost the entirety of Central and Eastern Europe and also a few random countries in South America! At least someone thought to give the poor little child a set of wings!

Of course, it was a genius idea from Santa! After all, children are cheap! "Sometimes costing just a smile and a Vanillekipferl!" I thought, as I thanked my girlfriend's youngest cousin, and exchanged a cookie for another glass of Punsch which she'd kindly brought me from the kitchen. And as more trips to the kitchen were avoided with streams of

younger cousins fetching me my every wish, I began to forgive Santa Claus his little white Christmas lie, and the initial pain felt at its discovery melted away into the never-ending stream of Vanillekipferl and the happy sounds of children opening Christmas presents.

After all, I thought, in today's modern world where there seems to be no time at all to do anything, outsourcing your business makes perfect sense to anybody who values quality time spent with the family in the holidays. While the Christkind lugs presents around Europe, Santa is free to expand the Santa Claus brand, star in more television adverts, and to spend time with his own little Clauses. While the stream of little cousins replenished the Vanillekipferl supply, I was free to spend more time with the family, concentrate on trying to understand the complexities of the Innviertlerisch Dialekt and essentially have a better Christmas all round.

So, I guess what I'm trying to say is, sure, Christmas contains a little white lie. As white as white sausages, freshly grated horseradish, and snowdrifts in the Austrian countryside. Buy hey, it's an understandable one, and when you find out the truth, in the beginning it hurts, but cookies, and especially Vanillekipferl, make it better, especially the ones you didn't fetch yourself. After all, it could be worse, at least it's not as bad as finding out something like ... it was really your parents all along that bought the presents, and there's no such thing as Santa's super-fast, magic sleigh and there's no Santa and no Christkind, and,... ahhhrrggg you know what I mean, what ridiculous things people say sometimes! So, no matter who brings your presents this Christmas, whether it's Santa, or his little helper, I hope you all have a fabulous holiday and eat loads of yummy Vanillekipferl!

Written by Mr Jordan, edited by Mr Jordan's wife's little cousin