

SANTA, SLAIN

Santa lies half-deflated on a neighbor's lawn this morning. I'm walking my dog Nellie at 5:15 AM. She's had a rough night, but Santa has had a worse one. The eight-foot Santa has his face to the lawn; his crumpled body pulses with a few last heartbeats as the electric fan that animates him loses power. Next to him lie the corpses of a deflated reindeer and a deflated jack-in-the-box with a dead gingerbread man hanging over its side. It looks like a Christmas massacre—as if gangsters with Tommy guns had driven by on their sleds and left no witnesses.

Whoever had the idea that these inflated holiday figures were charming? Even fully standing, they look grotesque—like those inflatable, collapsing yellow tubes you see on used car lots. A few years ago everyone adorned their houses with lasers that projected moving stars and spangles. To my mind at least, they were visually arresting. Now those are gone.

The holiday is over. The bomb-cyclone of wind and ice has wiped through the map of America like an eraser moving diagonally upwards across a blackboard. I'm glad the holiday music is over; the songs are cheery but their relentlessness feels suffocating. Lynn and I were eating at Mulberry Street Restaurant in Woodbridge, and in a single hour I heard "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" four times. ("You will get a sentimental feeling...") Driving home, Lynn wanted me to take the long way so she could see the Christmas lights. I told her, affectionately, that she was still a baby. She was offended by this—and I was forced to go into an immediate clarification that I meant she was *child-like*—she had retained her sense of wonder.

Later that same night, I see spinning red fire-engine lights against the curtains; I hear sirens and loud music. I call to Lynn, "It's Santa!" And, sure enough, the fire truck is blasting José Feliciano's "Feliz Navidad" (that well-known Bethlehem hit), and behind the truck, in his Santa-mobile adorned with colorful lights, rides the Man himself—bearded, red-suited, waving. Mrs. Claus is riding with him.

I hear the front door open—and Lynn is now standing on the front walk waving to Santa. I remind her that this is proof that she's a baby. (She's still offended.)

Nellie continues to have a bad stomach. Despite my constant walking her, she has diarrhea in the house—on the one strip of white carpet we own. Poor Nellie is mortified and slinks back to her mat in the dining room. I clean it up, and see that it's red.

"Lynn," I say. "There's blood here." Now we are both in a panic. We study Nellie's bowel movements the rest of the day. She has energy and vitality, but we hear her stomach gurgling, and she resists eating. Lynn books an appointment for Nellie at her regular vet in Nyack for the next morning. We spend all day trying to comfort Nellie. Lynn lures her to eat a little boiled chicken by half-eating it herself and talking in odd faux-Japanese to Nellie—who seems to understand it.

The next morning there's no more blood, and Nellie half-heartedly eats a little chicken and rice. As Lynn packs up to leave for Nyack, I sit on the back porch sofa with Nellie nestled against my right leg. I feel the vital heat from her little white cylindrical body next to me, and in my mind I already hear the death sentence from the vet: the cancer, the tumor, the obstruction, the injection to stop her poor beating heart.

I close my hand tightly around Nellie. I imagine that this is the last time I'll feel her warmth....

Sometime in the early afternoon, Lynn calls me from Nyack. “The vet felt Nellie all over, and says she’s OK. She gave me some anti-diarrheal medicine. She says that occasional blood in the stool is not unusual. We should keep watching her. And she said keep feeding her chicken and rice for awhile.”

I’ve lit a candle in the kitchen to watch over Nellie, and, as I watch it burn, I offer up my gratitude for protecting my little girl. Thank God.

“You will get a sentimental feeling....”