



BABY BOOMER ARRIVES

JANUARY 1946

We are all born into a story that begins long before our arrival. My chapter opens in Sandusky, Ohio, January, 1946. Tommy, the first-born and my oldest brother, spotted our family car coming down Madison Street. “The Japs are coming, the Japs are coming!” he screamed at the top of his lungs. My other five siblings, scared to death, dove under the snowy shrubs to take cover.

As Dad pulled into the driveway, Tommy calmly walked up to the car, opened the door, and had the privilege of being the first to hug Mom, finally home from the hospital. He barely glanced at me, the new baby in her arms. He was not interested or impressed. Babies were not special to Tommy. One had arrived almost every year since he was born.

On that winter day, all six Murray kids had been bundled into snowsuits and sent out to play by Aunt Sabina, Dad’s favorite sister, and Jean Dovekie, our best babysitter. Aunt Sabina and Jean were

MORTAL SIN ON MY SOUL

hoping Mom could have a quiet moment upon her return home from the hospital, but there was no such thing as a quiet moment at 124 East Madison Street. I'd arrived into a story full of action and passion, and loaded with surprises. The larger world was about to change dramatically, as well.

The Second World War had ended and the Cold War was about to begin. For the first time in history, an atomic bomb had been used against an enemy, and the United States had used it. The soldiers were all returning from the war, buying homes, and making babies, lots of them—lots of us. We were called baby boomers, and we were about to change America.

I was number seven in the Murray family, and while no one knew it that day, there would be no more annual babies coming to 124 East Madison Street. Both the war machine and the baby machine had stopped, at least temporarily.



A MURRAY CHRISTMAS

It was a week before Christmas, 1948, when out of the blue, Dad jumped up from the dinner table and dashed toward the back door shouting, “I think I heard some noises outside—don’t move! Did anyone else hear it? Sounded like sleigh bells to me.”

The seven of us were at the kitchen table and dinner was almost finished. We were waiting for dessert. Mom had bought cookies shaped like snowmen, bells, and Santa Claus. They were frosted with a thick layer of white buttercream and decorated with red, green, and yellow sugar. The bakery truck that stopped at our house twice a week only had these cookies the few weeks before Christmas, and we loved them.

Suddenly, we were distracted from our cookie anticipation by a bell ringing outside our house. (It sounded a lot like our dinner bell.) The ringing came first from the front and then from the back of our house. We jumped up and down in our seats, screaming with excitement.

MORTAL SIN ON MY SOUL

Out of breath, Dad came running back into the kitchen and sat down at the table. All seven kids were shouting: “We heard bells, Daddy. They sounded just like Santa’s sleigh. We all heard it, didn’t we, Mom? I know it was Santa!”

Dad acted like he hadn’t heard a thing, but did suggest, “Oh, I wouldn’t be surprised if the old boy was checking up on you children. Who here has been naughty, and who has been nice? What do you think, Mommy? How about Maureen? Have you been drinking your milk? Or Joe, have you been a good boy?”

Joe looked very serious as he said, “I have been really good, Daddy. I’m even trying not to wet my bed. Santa will know I’m trying, won’t he?”

I was sitting next to Joe in my highchair. Joe touched my hand protectively and said, “My baby sister has been really good, too. Mary never cries.” Then Joe’s big eyes widened, and in an even more concerned tone he said, “Daddy, I think we should send Santa a letter telling him about Mary’s problem. If he hears her crying at night, he may think she is being naughty. We need to tell him it is just Mom squirting that soapy water up her butt. It hurts. She can’t help crying.” (In 1948 babies whose bowels didn’t move daily were given enemas. Mine didn’t.)

Dad reassured him, “Oh Joe, don’t worry. That ol’ white-whiskered guy is pretty darn smart. He knows who’s naughty and who’s nice. Our sweet baby Mary is never a bad girl. Now, maybe Maureen could have a little trouble if the ol’ boy sees her full glass of milk. But I’m sure she’ll drink every drop tonight. Won’t you, Ennie?”

Dad jumped up from the table and announced, “I think I’d better investigate this bell ringing. I’ll look around the yard and see if there are any reindeer tracks in the snow.”

Dashing around to the backyard and down the basement stairs, he jumped into a Santa suit at “T. J. Murray speed.” Out the back

PART I—THE BEGINNING

door he went, grabbing the empty milk cartons that Mr. Fitz, the milkman, had left at our door. These made a perfect platform for Dad to stand on.

The older kids knew the routine, but they were delighted watching Maureen, Joe, and me with our wide-eyed belief. Pat sat quietly enjoying his new status as “wise about Santa.” But the older boys couldn’t miss the chance to add to Joe’s misery. Since Dad was gone and Mom was deaf, they had free rein. Under his breath, Jim cackled, “Ha, ha, ha. Wonder if Santa Claus knows you are Joe the Jap. He’ll think you love the Japs. You know what that will do for your Christmas haul? Flat zero—nothing but a big lump of coal. As a matter of fact, your whole stocking will probably be stuffed with coal. Ha, ha, ha.”

Not wanting to be upstaged by Jim, Bob added, “Oh Joe, if Santa finds out you’re Joe the Jew, he won’t bring you anything—not one single present. Jewish children don’t get Christmas gifts.”

Tommy was enjoying the banter, but knew when it was time to end it. He said, “Okay, enough. Stop it.”

Suddenly there he was. Santa Claus himself was looking into the big window in our kitchen. Bells were ringing as Santa shouted, “Ho, ho, ho!” The noise was deafening. Santa kept appearing and disappearing like a jack-in-the-box. Just when we would start to calm down, he would pop up in the window again. Each appearance caused more screams and cheers. Every time he caught sight of him, Joe yelled, “Santa, I want a raccoon hat and an atom bomb ring.”

At the height of the excitement, we heard a single “Ho!” and then a loud crashing sound, followed by, “Goddammit. Son of a bitch!” And Santa was gone for good.

It was too much for my two-year-old self. I started to cry. Joe held my hand and kept saying, “It’s okay, Mary. Don’t cry. Santa won’t bring you presents if he hears you crying.”

MORTAL SIN ON MY SOUL

A few minutes later, the front door opened and Dad appeared dressed as before. But now his lip was bleeding.

Mom quietly got up from the table and got Dad a warm washcloth. “Sit down, dear,” she said. “We were just about to have our Christmas cookies. I’ll make you some tea. It’s too bad you missed Santa Claus. He was right here in our backyard. We all saw him, didn’t we?”

“Sure enough, the old boy was out there,” Dad told us. “I tried to catch him but he was too fast for me. He was back in his sleigh before I got to him. I slipped on that damn ice in the driveway just as the reindeer flew back up into the sky. He was checking up on us, watching to see who is good in this house. Now eat your cookies.”