

Do You Remember Me?

Jay Fredrich

It was Sunday, July 31, 1949, when the boat carrying my dad, and Mr. Hubert Beck and his three children, rounded the point on a small lake and disappeared out of sight. Danny Beck, the youngest of the Beck children, was two years old that day. Danny's birthday and the hot, humid Sunday afternoon were good reasons for all of us to spend an afternoon picnicking, swimming and boating.

Our family—my mom and dad, my three sisters, my brother and I—were enjoying a summer outing with several aunts and uncles and with another family of friends from our parish—Hubert Beck, his wife, and their three children. At nine, I was the oldest of the eight children there, and we were all taking turns riding in the boat. Danny and my sister Sue, who was almost three, hadn't been allowed to ride in the boat because their mothers thought they were too young. That didn't seem to bother Sue, but Danny cried to go along every time the boat left with his daddy in it. Finally, Danny's mother relented, and the boat took off with my dad, Mr. Beck, and the three Beck children aboard. In just a couple of minutes, they rounded the point and were out of sight.

It was a while before anyone realized that the boat hadn't returned. Then someone noticed swimmers leaving the swimming area and swimming across the lake toward the area where the boat had last been seen. One of my uncles commented that it was dangerous for swimmers to swim in the boating area. Soon it was obvious that something was wrong because more swimmers were crossing the lake.

Somehow, we learned later, the boat had capsized. According to Mr. Beck, my dad grabbed the two Beck girls and swam to the shore about 50 feet away. Mr. Beck, who was not a strong swimmer, tried to make it to the shore with Danny, but Danny slipped out of his grip and disappeared beneath the water. As he struggled ashore to care for his girls, Mr. Beck saw my dad returning for Danny. Then he saw Dad disappear too.

Standing on the shore with his two daughters, Mr. Beck directed the first swimmers on the scene to the spot where he had seen Danny and my dad disappear. In less than 15 minutes they had my dad on shore, but they could not resuscitate him. They didn't find Danny until the next morning.

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Christmas Eve in 1949 was our first Christmas without our dad. It was also the first Christmas that Santa Claus visited our home. After supper on Christmas Eve, Mom and my aunt and uncle took us to our grandfather's farm out in the country, just as Mom and Dad had always done. Like he had every Christmas I could remember, Grandpa gave the five of us each a silver dollar. We visited a while and then returned home to see that, just like in Christmases past, while we were away, gifts had appeared under the Christmas tree in our living room. But before we could begin opening our gifts, which we had always done on Christmas Eve in the past, there was the sound of bells and a knock on the front door. My uncle went to the door, opened it, and in walked Santa with a big bag of packages.

Santa sat down, called each of us by name, asked whether we had been good, then had the five of us line up along the wall across the room from him. "Can you say your prayers for me?" he asked. First me, then my sister Carolyn, and finally my sister Betty—each of us recited a prayer for him. Phil and Sue were still too young to pray alone. Then he asked us all to sing for

him. Singing was something we loved to do, so we sang several Christmas songs for him. Finally he opened his bag and began distributing gifts to us. After a little more chitchat with us and the adults he said he needed to be on his way and left.

He came again the next year, and the next, and for several more years after that. Every year the routine was the same: call us each by name, ask us to say our prayers for him, and listen as we sang as a group for him. I don't remember whether it was that first year or the next year that I asked my sister Carolyn, who was only a year younger than me, whether she knew who Santa was. He had to be someone we knew because of some of the things he said each year, but I couldn't figure out whom. Neither could Carolyn. After Santa's Christmas visit each of the next several years Carolyn and I would discuss who Santa might be. We never could figure it out, and eventually we quit trying.

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On October 3, 1994, Mother died after a five-year bout with liver cancer. She had raised her five children alone, working at two jobs for almost 40 years to support herself and her children and to see each of them through 12 years of Catholic schools and into college.

I was living in Indiana then and had traveled to Little Rock to see her in the hospital and say goodbye two days before she died. My wife, Cecelia, our children and I returned to Little Rock for the Vigil Service and funeral, arriving just a couple of hours before the Vigil Service began with Mother's favorite prayer—the Rosary.

After the Rosary many people came up to offer their condolences, as people always do. Many of them I recognized immediately. Some I barely knew. I had left Little Rock more than 30 years earlier, returning only for visits with family and a few close friends. Consequently,

many of my encounters, particularly with the older visitors, began with them asking, “Do you remember me?” Sometimes that was followed with “I worked with your mother,” or “I was your mother’s postman,” or “I belonged to St. Edward’s with your mother,” or “I was your mother’s neighbor.” Sometimes I would remember them and sometimes I wouldn’t, but as we always are at times like this, I was impressed by the many people my mother’s life had touched. Then, suddenly, an elderly man was there, my sister Carolyn by his side. “Do you remember me?” he said. I looked, but had to say, “No, I’m sorry. I don’t.” I looked at Carolyn. She didn’t say a word, but I saw the beginning of a smile shining in her eyes. “You used to pray for me, and you used to sing for me,” he said. And after a brief pause, he continued, “I’m Santa Claus.”

“Jay,” Carolyn said, “this is Hubert Beck.” I laughed and said hello, and then, before I had a chance to think, I felt tears trickling down my cheeks.