

Do you believe in Santa Claus?

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Participating once in an exchange program in the United States I had a once in a lifetime opportunity to stay with and be part of an American family for the whole year. What amazing and unforgettable time it was! That was a unique chance for me to get an inside look at traditions of the country and experience the life style of an average American family. All events were memorable for me in one way or another, but Christmas was the best of all. In Russia I watched a lot of movies about Christmas secretly feeling a little jealous of all the nice traditions American people have.

Christmas, as it goes in one of the popular American songs, "is the most wonderful time of the year". Streets, buildings, trees are illuminated with lots of colored lights, everywhere you go you hear merry tunes of the well-known Christmas carols that create an atmosphere of joy and happiness.



Americans like a lot to decorate their houses and front yards trying to outbid their neighbors in the amount of ornaments, originality and cost of the design. On trees they place garlands of hundreds little twinkling lights and stars, the more the better. They erect giant snowmen and Santas, lighted reindeers with sleighs, they also arrange nativity scenes showing the baby Christ lying in manger and Mary, Joseph and wise men around Him. By the middle of December neighborhoods of all towns

and villages resemble bright enchanted fairylands. However, for some people competition goes so far, they don't even realize how tasteless their decorations look. It was also funny to see a few families had so much stuff on their front yards that it would remain there till spring, because it was a lot of work to put it away and no one would bother before it was actually the time to set up decorations for Easter.

Christmas is the busiest time for grown-ups who crowd stores hunting for gifts, but the most favorite time for children who try to behave well and be nice hoping to get from Santa Claus something they've been dreaming about for the whole year. Most American kids up to age 10 sincerely believe in Santa Claus coming on a sleigh at night and bringing presents, though parents actually have to act like one. That reminds me of a joke I heard people saying which goes like that: "there are four stages in life of a person – first, you believe in Santa Claus, second, you don't believe in him, third, you are Santa Claus and the last, fourth, you look like Santa Claus. Well, I have to admit, there is much truth in it.

In the family where I lived there were three children, and you can imagine that for about a month before December 25th they had been talking about nothing but Christmas, presents and school break. You should have seen their excitement and anticipation when they crossed out the days in the calendar waiting for the precious day to come.

On Christmas Eve before going to bed, the kids left a glass of milk and some cookies on the kitchen table for Santa Claus to taste as a sign of appreciation for his visit and gifts.

What a delight it was for them in the morning to find a half-empty glass, cookie crumbs all over the table and a note which said: "Thank you very much, the cookies were delicious, Santa." Well, whoever played Santa's role (you already guessed, the parents had a hand in this) could have been less messy, I suppose.

I recall that night on Christmas Eve was apparently the shortest in my life. No, don't think Santa Claus's triumphant arrival or jingling of the bells on his sleigh woke me up (in fact, as it turned out later, Santa's visit had been extremely quiet). I was awakened at about five in the morning by someone rustling in the living room. Through the little opening of the door of my room I saw beams of flashlights and heard whispering. Then came a loud and cheerful announcement of one of the children saying that it was the time for opening the presents. Reluctantly I headed for the living room, joining sleepy and tired parents wrapped in dressing-gowns and their agitated children in pyjamas. What sight it must have been!

What I saw in the living room took my breath away. There were lots of wrapped boxes and packages, big and small, under the Christmas tree. Each of our red stockings was stuffed with something. I had never thought that Christmas could be so much fun!

Before we could start opening our present, someone had to find a green pickle ornament hidden on the Christmas tree. There is a tradition in the United States (brought from Germany) that whoever finds the pickle gets to open his or her presents first and besides receives an extra gift. We grown-ups being generous, allowed the children to compete.

After that we spent the whole morning laughing, "ah-ing" and "wow-ing" as we unwrapped our presents.



In the evening we all gathered at the table for Christmas dinner which consisted of ham, potatoes, gravy, homemade bread, vegetables and desert. I learned that it was basically the kind of a meal American people have for Christmas, though of course there are some variations depending on the cultural roots of the particular family.



The day after Christmas is a big shopping day. The stores are again crowded with people who this time, believe it or not, return or exchange the gifts they got for Christmas. And as prices are drastically reduced, pragmatic Americans do their Christmas shopping for the next year and life goes on...