

And down the chimney he flew

By Charles Pinning

I had reached that transitional age when I was beginning to hear things; unspeakable, unimaginable things. Thus, I was particularly vulnerable when my older brother, dressed for the cold December day, posed one of life's pivotal questions: "Do you still believe in Santa Claus?"

I was lying on my bed reading and tried to ignore him.

"If so," he continued, "do you actually believe he comes down the chimney?"

"Yes," I replied, hoping he would go away.

"Really?" he said in mock astonishment. "You really believe he just flies down the chimney?"

I concentrated on my book.

"Okie-dokie," he said.

"I'm going up on the roof. I'll check to make sure nothing's blocking the chimney. Don't want ol' St. Nick to get slowed down on his big night. Only a few more days. ..."

It's always exciting for a child to go up on the roof, any roof. I tossed down my book, put on my parka and a hat and availed myself of the opportunity, as I wasn't allowed to go up there alone.

The view was exhilarating. Beyond our backyard was the field where we played war and built forts. On the other side of the house was our little street.

Down there was Mr. Tingley, checking his mail. He

glanced up disapprovingly. Old coot.

My brother kept a stool up on the roof for sitting when he sneaked cigarettes. He was a Boy Scout and had a weather station set up there, complete with spinning cups that measured the wind speed.

Standing on the stool he looked down the chimney.

"Seems clear. Wanna look?" He got off the stool and I got up on it. I was still too short to see down. "Here, I'll give you a boost," and he pushed my bottom while I pulled myself up with my hands and slung one leg then another over the crowning row of bricks.

As I sat on the edge of the chimney, he put a hand on my lower back. "Why don't you play Santa Claus?" and he gave me a little push. I knew he was just fooling around, but a loose brick shifted under me and down I went!

"Whoa!" My chubby parka buffering me against the chimney walls and slowing my fall, I descended smoothly, like a tennis ball dropped back into its cylindrical can, stopping when my feet landed on the closed damper.

"Are you OK?" called my brother.

"Yeah," I coughed. "It's dark in here."

I heard my mother's voice in the living room, only a few feet away. "Where are you?"

"I'm in the chimney."

"What do you mean you're

in the chimney?" she said.

Then I heard my father say, "What's going on?"

I could hear my brother running down stairs. He was in the living room now. "What happened?" said my father.

"He was sitting on the chimney, but, uh, he slipped."

"You let your little brother sit on the chimney?"

"Dad—"

"Be quiet," my father commanded.

"Are you hurt?" he called to me.

"I'm OK," I called back.

"Just don't move. I'm calling the fire department."

"Like he's gonna move," I heard my brother say.

The hook and ladder truck showed up, siren and all. They dropped a harness down that I worked between my legs and they pulled me up "like a cork!" my mother would exclaim when she recounted the story over the years. "He was covered with soot. His parka was ripped. But he was fine. His bones were soft."

"Dad was mad," I'd say.

"Your father was furious!"

But that was a long time ago, when we all lived under the same roof, and sometimes on the roof, as a family. And that is the best kind of Christmas, no matter who comes down the chimney.

Charles Pinning, an occasional contributor, lives in Providence and stays off the roof.