

It was in elementary school that my son dealt with his first bully. He didn't tell me about it at first, but to a mother, who knows her child better than she knows herself, the slightest change in behavior is always a big red flag.

The school year started out fine, but then almost every other day, I'd receive a call from the school nurse saying that my son's stomach hurt and for me to come and pick him up. The first week, I thought that maybe he needed a good flushing out, so that Friday I gave him a laxative. But this "stomachache" started back up that following Monday and went on into the week after he'd been fine over the weekend. When I went to go pick him up, I asked if something or maybe someone at school was making his tummy hurt, and he was quiet. Bingo! At least I knew that it wasn't the lunches I was packing.

I told Baby Bird to tell me what was happening and that, whatever it was, I'd fix it because that's what mommas do. You could see in his face that he was really hesitant, but he told me anyway. I was really upset when I found out that someone was picking on my kid! Oh, I was going to fix it, but I had to tread lightly—I didn't want to do anything to make things worse for him.

I went to the principal first to let her know what was happening and that I wanted it to stop. She said that she would meet with the teacher along with the two boys to see if she could get things straightened out. Being the mom that I am, I wanted to see this little boy who was messing with my Baby Bird.

I dropped by the class to sit in. The teacher was having a meeting with another parent, so I just took a little seat to wait my turn to have a talk with her. My son was happy to see me, and I quietly asked him what color shirt the bully had on. I knew that if I asked who the bully was, he would have literally pointed him out. After I saw him, I instructed my son to go on back to his group. I'd just sit and watch.

I moved to the empty seat beside the bully and struck up a conversation. I don't know what I expected, but this boy was a little cutie—too cute to be picking on folks. And he was little. He was way shorter than my son. I was wondering why the hell my son was tripping off the little pip-squeak.

"You Nick's momma?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied. "Who are you?" I asked, all nice and mom-like. He told me his name, and I said, "Nice to meet you." I proceeded to stick out my hand to shake his. I asked him if he was friends with my son, and he hunched his shoulders.

"Sort of, I guess." I asked what that meant, and he shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "I don't know."

He pulled out a bag of Cheetos and offered me some, so I obliged and took a few. I didn't see anyone else eating their snacks, and I wasn't sure if it was snack time or not. I figured that maybe no one else was keeping up with it being snack time, or maybe this bully ran things around there to the point that snack time was whenever he said it was.

My son, meanwhile, sat across the room, looking wide-eyed and confused. I guess he was wondering why his momma was eating Cheetos with the source of his tummy aches. What my son didn't know was that his momma was "fixing it," just like she said she would. By the time the teacher got around to talking to me, the bully and I had talked, laughed, and shared a snack, and I had him looking at my son in a different light.

My son and the bully didn't become besties after that day, but the bully did leave my son alone. They ran into each other later, at the first football game in their ninth-grade year. They

were attending rival schools. My son said that the boy asked him if he remembered him. They gave each other a handshake and a nod and went on their way.

After that incident, I had a talk with my son about not judging others. I told him, “Please always remember that there is always a bigger picture with why people act the way that they do. You never know what some kids have to go home to. Some kids go home to abusive situations, and some go home knowing that their next meal won’t be until the following morning when they get to school. Some go home to parents who are at work until way after their bedtime, so they have to see about themselves. There are all types of stressors that kids deal with in their home lives that make them act up at school, be it through not doing their work, talking back to the teacher, or finding folks to bully.” I urged my son to try to keep all of this in mind when some people are mean for no apparent reason. Their behavior isn’t excusable, but it may make sense why they are the way they are.

I remember being in fourth grade and sitting at the lunch table with my class. We were all talking about the holidays and what we wanted for Christmas when, for some reason, this boy (I remember his name, but I won’t say it) turned and said, “I bet ole Kelly still believes in Santa.” He started laughing. Some of the other kids at the table giggled, and I remember looking at him like, “What the hell are you talking about?”

A million thoughts went running through my head. First of all, what the fuck did he mean “*still* believes in Santa”? Of course I did. And why was he saying it as if there was no Santa? I wanted to throw up. I’d already written my list and planned out what I was going to tell the man when I saw him at the mall!

Finally I responded. “So what?” I said, and I laughed as I said it, but only to throw him off. I figured that if I laughed, he’d be confused as to whether or not I still believed or if I was just joking around. Either way, my mind was a scrambled mess for the rest of the day. I couldn’t think straight.

I couldn’t wait to get home to tell my mom. When I told her what that boy had said, her response was, “Oh, he’s probably one of those bad kids who won’t get everything he asked for, so he’d rather think there is no Santa than to think that it’s his fault that Santa won’t bring him what he wants.” I thought about it and determined that she was probably right.

That Christmas Eve, I went to bed and was startled awake by some loud banging coming from downstairs. I was excited and terrified—Santa was down there! I sat straight up in my bed and called for my mom. She came racing up the stairs. “Kelly Lynn, go back to sleep!” was all she said.

“What is all of that noise and is that Santa downstairs? Did he eat the cookies I left him and is he putting my stuff under the tree?” I asked. I didn’t even think that it might have been my dad. His being home was hit or miss, so I assumed my mom was down there supervising Santa, telling him where to put stuff.

Mom told me that Santa was indeed down there and for me to hurry up and go back to sleep. She closed my bedroom door and went on back downstairs. I lay there with my heart racing a mile a minute. First of all, why was my mom downstairs? Did she know Santa personally? And if so, why didn’t she tell me? And what in the world was on my list that required Santa to be making all that noise? And did I leave enough cookies out, and did he just come in through the front door since we had no fireplace? Oh, the many things that ran through my mind that night!

The next morning, I was scared as shit to go downstairs to see what Santa had left. Why had he made such a racket the night before? I eased downstairs to find my mom and dad both laid out on the sofa, asleep.

I almost fainted! Santa had brought me the huge Barbie Dreamhouse, the Barbie Corvette, three new Barbie's, a bunch of furniture for the Dreamhouse, a new easel, some paint supplies, a Sit-n-Spin, a Hippity Hop ball, and a few model cars that needed to be assembled! I'd hit the jackpot! I immediately thought of my classmate, feeling bad that he probably hadn't received a lot for Christmas. "That's what he gets for not believing," I told myself.

Some people have a problem with allowing their kids to believe in Santa Claus, the Easter bunny, and the tooth fairy, and I get it. They don't want their kids to grow up being lied to about make-believe characters. The thing is it's make-believe, so what's the big deal? Do adults really think that a fifteen-year-old is not going to realize that it was his or her parents, and not some stranger from the North Pole, who were breaking into his or her house and leaving behind a bunch of stuff all those years? Something would be terribly wrong if my son, at almost twenty years old, still didn't realize that I was the one who bought all the crap he wanted.

Those mythical characters helped feed my child's and my imagination. How wonderful would it be for me as an adult to make a list of all of the things I really wanted, send it to the North Pole, and have it all magically appear in my living room or driveway on Christmas morning?

The Easter bunny is a little different; he's creepier. Santa's a man, but the Easter bunny is a giant rabbit! On Easter Sunday, he would leave a giant chocolate version of himself along with a huge basket full of gross candy and a few cool toys. For some reason he would always leave it at my grandparents' house.

My whole family would meet up at my grandparents' house on Easter Sunday, and we would go to church. I would spend the whole time staring at the stained glass windows, wondering how they colored the glass and why the glass was in the patterns it was in. I hated being there. I hated singing the songs, and I wondered how everyone around me had memorized all of those boring songs they sang so intensely. Even back then I used to wonder what it was that the pastor had said that "moved" people to shout in agreement. I consider myself spiritual, but I've never really been able to connect to organized religion.

Anyway, about the Easter bunny, after church we'd all head back to my grandparents' house, and I remember we'd stand out in front of the house and take pictures by the blooming dogwood trees and the wisteria. The wisteria was so beautiful and fragrant, but it was full of those big bumblebees.

After pictures, we'd head into the house so that I could get whatever the Easter bunny had left, and then we'd have a big Easter dinner. On one particular occasion, my granddaddy told me that I had to search the house for what the Easter bunny had left me. I had no problem with looking all over the place downstairs, but going upstairs by myself was a whole other ball game! Once I realized that what I was looking for might be upstairs, I gave up. I decided that maybe he hadn't left me anything, and if he had, maybe I didn't need it.

My granddaddy told me that he was sure that the Easter bunny had been there, but I really didn't feel like going to look. This was a few years after I'd given up my pacifier, so I had nothing to fall back on when my nerves got bad. I mean, suppose I went upstairs and the Easter bunny was still up there?

See, all of the fictional childhood characters were cool to think about, but it wasn't cool to be running into them anywhere outside of the mall. That's why no kids really wanted to take

pictures with Santa until they were older and teetering on the idea that maybe he wasn't real. At least Santa was a human. Can you imagine running into a human-sized rabbit hiding out in your house?

Granddaddy finally went with me upstairs to find my stash. It was great! I got a huge chocolate bunny and a big basket with a two-foot-tall doll in it. It was one of those dolls whose eyes would close if you leaned it back and reopen if you stood it upright. Those dolls were a little weird because they were plastic and hollow. If you popped their arm or leg off, there was nothing in there. Not that I thought the doll would have a skeletal system; I actually don't know what I thought.

I do remember I had a Ballerina Barbie that had a little crown on the top of her head. You could move her joints into different positions (or should I say poses), while making her spin by twisting the crown on her head. Once she got old, I was able to pry her leg off to see what was really going on with that doll and to see how it was made. It actually had what looked like fake bones inside, I guess to make her joints move.

The tooth fairy was pretty cool because it was a girl and she was a fairy, but I used to wonder how she could fly around collecting a bunch of teeth if she was so little. Where did she put them? Was there a little bag she put them in? What was she collecting them for? If they were worth money, I reasoned, maybe I should've been holding on to them to sell them myself one day. Who was buying folks' old teeth, though?

Once when my son lost a tooth, the tooth fairy totally forgot that he'd put his tooth under his pillow. He came into my room crying the next morning, his little tooth in the palm of his hand, saying that the tooth fairy didn't want his tooth. I was so upset with myself that I wanted to cry.

How dare that lazy chick forget about his tooth and sleep through the night! I took the tooth and pretended to examine it. I told him that she probably didn't take it because it wasn't clean enough and that we'd clean it up really good and try again. That night I stayed up to make sure I got that tooth from under the pillow, and I left a buck under there in exchange.