

The Santa Claus Girl
A novel inspired by true events.

Copyright © 2020

Patricia P Goodin

Preface

Epidemic Virus Outbreak; No Vaccine Available
Presidential Candidates Spar in Election Year
Sweeping Immigration Reform Bill Passed
Defendants Jailed for Conspiring With Russians
Hottest Month on Record for New York

Headlines ripped from 2020 news stories? Actually—the year was 1952.

The year 1952 was also a presidential election year and it too was filled with headlines about the controversial McCarran-Walter Immigration Act and its sweeping reform. In New York, July 1952 set a new record for the hottest month ever recorded in the state.

That same year a more ominous record-setting statistic emerged as America faced a perilous epidemic viral outbreak for which there was no known vaccine, and no cure: poliomyelitis, commonly known as polio. When the virus swept across the country it was the most feared disease in American culture. The year 1952 marked the height of the polio epidemic in the United States, with more than 58,000 reported cases of the disease, resulting in 21,000 cases of paralysis and 3,000 deaths. When paralysis impacted the diaphragm, the foreboding iron lung was a last hope for patients unable to breathe on their own—if one was available.

And through it all, America moved forward. With grit and determination, missteps and magnificent achievements, America moved forward. The perseverance and collective goodwill of the everyman and the everywoman pushed America to find its way.

Chapter 1

The Surprise

It wasn't as though she was ignoring the teacher—not intentionally, anyway. Miss Thompson's voice was there, somewhere in the background, swirling around the fuzzy softness of monotone sounds. It crisscrossed the air that February afternoon in a nondescript classroom of semi-engaged sophomores at Lincoln High School in New York City. Megan wasn't ignoring it. It was just that an image of Megan's father had suddenly emerged in the forefront of her mind, and lingered. There he was, all smiles and saying goodbye, standing on the tarmac in front of that plane that seemed so huge. He was so tall, and she was so little. Megan was only five back in 1942, but she remembered so clearly how he looked in his crisp army uniform. Though ten years had passed, she could still see his starched khaki shirt with its stiff pointed collar and the matching khaki tie, tight at his neck. There was that funny little rectangular hat. Not a hat, really. More like a cloth envelope, opened and turned upside down, sitting at a tilted angle on his head. And that dry wind that blows in late summer seemed to swallow the heat as it swept across the sun-baked concrete. She could feel its warmth rising across her face, prickling her cheeks.

And then it vanished. Replaced by a nudge, a slight jar, from inside her forehead. That first little signal Megan hoped wasn't accurate. Nope. She turned her head quickly and there it was again. Ugh! Just over her right eyebrow. How much longer before class was over? Thirty minutes. Thank God it was the last class. She could go to the nurse's office, maybe ask for an aspirin. Though they always made such a big deal out of this stuff lately. She'd promised her friend Peggy and the other girls she'd help decorate for tomorrow's Valentine's dance. She'd been excited about helping. Would the nurse want to call her mother? If her mom thought Megan was sick, getting ready for the dance could become problematic. Maybe one of the girls had aspirin. Toughing it out seemed the best option for now.

New York General Hospital in Brooklyn wasn't particularly different from any other city hospital. Its walls were beige and that unfortunate green color that wasn't quite the color of pea soup but not quite sage, either. More like a blend of the two, which didn't help anybody. There were doctors walking briskly down hallways and busy nurses in white uniform dresses with bright white hats and even brighter white shoes. Orderlies pushed patients to and fro on gurneys and in wheelchairs. And, as in some of the other city

hospitals, New York General had a public schoolroom on its third floor, P.S. 401, a school for chronically ill and crippled children. The hospital schools were run by Virginia Douglas, 63, a veteran of the New York City public school system. Her assistant was Valerie Jackson, 45, a Black woman. Both women were alumni of Hunter College, where Valerie had earned an undergraduate degree in teaching and a graduate degree in English. She'd supported herself through school by working as a waitress in a restaurant that served only whites. Virginia earned an undergraduate degree at Hunter, an MA at Columbia, and later a PhD at Fordham. The two women understood that, together, they really co-managed the hospital schools, and they liked it that way.

Valerie was a quiet, polite woman of average height. The metal and leather brace on her lower right leg was a surprise to some. Her slight frame, feminine features, and demure style of dress might give someone the impression she could be a pushover, which would be a fatal mistake. One didn't acquire the grace and strength Valerie possessed without navigating some of life's toughest challenges—successfully.

Virginia's impressive teaching career spanned several decades. It was her choice to teach in some of the city's most disadvantaged districts. She felt she had been blessed, after all. Not that she was particularly privileged. She'd earned every step along the way herself. She had the foresight and purpose to bring her energy and vision to where she felt it would be useful. After earning her doctorate at Fordham, she became a junior principal. She had been at the helm of P.S. 31 in Manhattan's lower east side for several years and had chosen to take the reins at the hospital school when the opportunity had presented itself.

Like Valerie, Virginia's petite frame, silver hair, and standard pearl necklace might cause some to prematurely underestimate her character, to cast her in the sweet-little-old-lady persona. And, as with Valerie, that would be a mistake. Because it takes one tough woman to deal with a doctor too busy to answer questions, a nurse unwilling to bend visiting rules, a parent refusing to advocate for their child, or a student who has lost hope.

Yup, Virginia and Valerie were the right team. A force to be reckoned with, as more than one school and hospital administrator had discovered. The two women knew each other well. How each other thought. How each other felt.

Virginia's desk had been around for a while. Its light oak was yellowed with age, and the squat, solid legs were dotted with nicks from brooms and vacuum cleaners. The desktop's thin veneer had chipped off around the corner edges long ago. The grain and small cracks were filled with fine gray lines where dust and soot had settled in, too stubborn for the janitor's rag to remove.

Among the stacks of papers and files on top was a crystal flower vase given to Virginia by her colleagues when she left her former position to come to the hospital school. In a more obvious position were two simple handmade items: a pencil cup and a carved wooden apple. The craftsmanship of the apple was far from perfect, but that didn't matter to Virginia. The pencil cup was an empty tin can, its sides wrapped in a faded fabric of small red-and-white checks, held in place by rudimentary stitches of blue thread. As a decorative addition, buttons in assorted colors and sizes were attached with the same blue thread and sewn in a circle around the middle of the can. Both the apple and the pencil cup were unexpected gifts from students to Virginia. It had been the holiday season, the year at the height of the Great Depression. Virginia realized her young students would have no means to buy a Christmas gift for a parent or sibling, and she understood how that fact weighed on them. She wanted to empower her students to experience the joy of giving and to appreciate the importance of generosity, particularly in harsh economic times. As a morale booster, she had brought two boxes of assorted scrap materials to class—odd pieces of costume jewelry, fabric remnants, empty jars, lumber waste, string, discarded books—and guided the children through ideas to create a gift. A lace applique on a glass jar became a vase; a piece of fabric became a decorative book cover. Feeling the experience was as valuable as traditional studies, she'd set aside an hour each day for the children to work on their gift projects. She'd blocked out the final hour before holiday break as time for the students to wrap their presents to take home. After seeing the last student out the door that year, Virginia returned to her desk, where she discovered the carved apple and pencil cup, each with a handwritten note: "Thank you, Mrs. Douglas. Merry Christmas." For the past twenty years, both items had accompanied her to different schools where she'd taught throughout the district and to the hospital school, where each continued to occupy a place of prominence on her desk.

The broad blackboard on the wall behind the desk looked freshly washed. Its blank charcoal canvas was punctuated only by today's date written in chalky white script: February 8, 1952. And there she was, Public School 401 principal Virginia O'Hanlon Douglas, seated purposefully at her desk, facing an empty classroom and—daydreaming.

"Virginia?"

In the haze of drifting thoughts, Virginia heard the distant voice of her teacher from so long ago. Was she yelling at Virginia? For a split second she remembered the time when those prissy girls ratted her out, and she hadn't even done anything to that girl.

“Virginia? I’m thinking we can get out of here early for once. You ready to go?”

Oh. *Thank God.* It was Valerie.

“Valerie! I’m sorry. Guess I’m guilty. Of daydreaming,” Virginia confessed. “Don’t tell the kids.”

“Your secret’s safe with me. Tomorrow’s calendar is in your box. Do you need anything else before I go?”

“No. No thanks, Val. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow.” Valerie nodded and headed out the door.

Virginia took a moment to collect her thoughts and bring herself into the present. She even allowed herself the luxury of feeling that bounce of joy that comes from knowing you’re leaving work a little early. She grabbed her purse from her desk drawer, gathered her wool coat and scarf from the coatrack near the door, and headed out of the classroom. She’d used the daily walk to the elevator to perfect the art of balancing her purse from arm to arm while placing the left hand and then the right in each sleeve of her coat. By the time the elevator reached her floor and its doors opened, she appeared effortlessly composed, with scarf wrapped, coat buttoned, gloves on, and purse neatly hanging from her forearm. No contest, a strong candidate for Eleanor Lambert’s Best-Dressed List.

Outside, the cold February wind buffeted her face.

Thankfully, the bus was just pulling into the stop in front of the hospital. She wouldn’t have to run. Not that she couldn’t, but it wouldn’t be smart. Not with a chance of ice on the sidewalk. The ground was still covered in snow, and Virginia noticed a few of the fresh, powdery flakes had begun falling as she made her way toward the bus.

Its accordion door was stubborn, the rubber rim refusing to budge in the bitter cold. After a few good vibrations, it finally gave in and opened fully, allowing the few passengers getting off to exit and new passengers to step aboard. Virginia found an open seat next to a window, all of which were fogged up from the humid air inside pushing against the cold glass. She was happy to be headed home before the snowplows became necessary. The bus lurched forward and then found its pace, making its way onto the street, passing storefronts and busy sidewalks where pedestrians bundled up to their necks in coats and scarves tried valiantly to overcome the cold wind. A few minutes later, the bus turned another corner, revealing the snow-covered lawn of Lincoln High School. It was late in the afternoon; most of the students had gone home and the teachers’ parking lot was nearly empty. The weathered two-story building sat quietly in the snow behind several dark, crooked, bare trees.

Inside the empty school hallways, the faint sound of teenage voices echoed off metal lockers and linoleum floors. A student-made poster advertising the upcoming Valentine's dance was taped on the wall next to a door with the sign, "Administration Offices." Farther down the hall and past the corridor near the locked science lab, Megan McGuire, her friend Peggy Tugucci, and three of their friends were headed to their respective lockers. They needed to dump their books before tackling the invigorating task of decorating for the dance. Their excited chatter grew louder as they made their way around a corner and down a dim hallway, the light overhead flickering from a faulty bulb. Megan welcomed the subdued light.

"I'm so excited I can't stand it!" Peggy's shrill voice bounced off the walls and ceiling and floor. "I can't wait 'til tomorrow night!"

Megan managed a forced smile as the girls headed down the hall, passing a March of Dimes "Fight Infantile Paralysis" poster hanging on the upper half of the wall on the left. The young poster girl, adorned in a picture-perfect starched white dress and wearing metal braces on her legs, seemed to be looking down at them. The girls reached the alcove where long rows of gray lockers stood tightly against a wall. After stowing her books, Peggy finally noticed the void that was usually filled by her friend's bubbly personality. And then she noticed something else.

"Megan. You don't look so well. Are you okay?"

Peggy's sober tone caught Megan off guard.

"I—I'll be all right. I—think I'm getting a cold," Megan said feebly.

"Meg, you *really* don't look so well. Maybe you shouldn't stay and try to help us. We'll manage."

The way Megan was feeling, her disappointment quickly dissolved into relief.

"Yeah. Okay," Megan said—rather easily, Peggy noticed. "If you're sure."

"You want me to call your mom?"

Megan didn't want that. Megan knew that would seal it with her mom. Going to the dance would be out of the question.

"No. And she's at work," Megan quickly replied. "If she thinks I'm sick, she won't let me go tomorrow. I'll be okay. I'll go straight home. And get in bed."

"Promise?"

"Promise," Megan said, mustering her rapidly depleting energy to convince her friend.

"All right. If you're sure."

"I'm sure. See you later."

Megan was becoming acutely aware of the growing ache inside her forehead as she pulled her coat, scarf, and knit hat from her locker. It was an effort putting the bulky coat on, but it meant she was one step closer to heading outside and home. Every decision she was about to make, regardless of how small, would be focused on one goal: getting home. Into her bed. Lying down. That's all that mattered. She hadn't realized she felt this badly. Get to her house. Her bed. Lie down.

Outside, the cold air felt good. The gray clouds were quiet. The puffs of snowflakes were sticking together and looked like tiny weightless planets floating through the air.

The block seemed to take longer. Cross the street. Another block. *I can walk this*, Megan thought to herself. Was she drifting? Was she doing this? She felt a little fuzzy, almost kind of fun. Was she smiling? No. That ache above her eyebrow, the nailhead, reminded her with a jolt that smiling was not a part of this. It reminded Megan of her goal.

Falling snow quieted the stoops and sidewalks in the residential area Megan had entered. What was that twinge in her right thigh? There. There it was again.

Are my legs acting rubbery? Megan wondered to herself, but there wasn't time or energy to consider anything other than attaining her goal. Megan's will gave way to the directives of her brain messaging every nerve, every cell, every impulse to propel her home, to her bed, head on pillow—before everything was short-circuited by something else.

The dull nailhead kept pressing, pushing harder and harder, bringing with it a surge of nausea. Followed by a wave, a flush that bubbled to the surface of Megan's face as fever overcame her. All at once, her head throbbed and her neck felt stiff and tender. Megan's legs gave out from underneath her and she slumped onto the snow-covered sidewalk. She allowed herself to lie there, motionless, for a moment. It actually felt better to be horizontal and have the weight taken off her legs. Relief. And the icy snow felt good against her warm cheek. Heavenly. She could see her breath rise over the snow as she exhaled. The cool relief buoyed her and allowed a split second of self-consciousness.

What if somebody sees me?

The thought propelled her to push herself up to a sitting position. She located her books and purse and slid them toward herself in the powdery snow. She managed to stand up and continue walking. Snow was stuck to the front of her coat, but she had no spare energy to care. Each step became a purposeful effort. Just place one foot in front of the other and lean forward. Keep going. One more street to cross.

My nightgown. If I can just put that on, Megan imagined. The old one.

Somehow, it seemed helpful to think about her nightgown. It had been worn and washed so many times that its blue floral print was barely discernible against the white background. Its once-thick flannel was now light and airy. Easy to get on. She knew where it was. Hanging on the hook inside her bedroom closet door. Familiar.

There, just ahead, she could see her modest row house with its brick facade. She could see its steps and the white door with its little arched window on top. Megan pulled her right leg up to the first step, then her left. The next step, and then the next. Her key in her purse. The door opened. *Oh, thank you, God.*

The nightgown felt soft and light against her skin. The coolness of the pillowcase on her cheek was soothing, but being able to transfer the weight of her heavy head from her stiff neck to the welcoming pillow meant everything. She lay on her side, no strength or will left to pull the covers over herself, and closed her eyes. But in a moment, they opened wide. *Panic! This couldn't be that. Could it? No. It couldn't be.*

I just need to sleep, she instructed herself.

Megan surrendered to the fever, the pain, the exhaustion, and fell asleep.

“Megan, I’m home!” Megan’s mother, Nora McGuire, announced. “Why are the lights off? Are you here? Megan?”

Megan didn’t know how long she’d been asleep when she heard the sound of the front door being shut. It was dark in the house.

“Maybe she’s still at school,” Nora mumbled to herself, “decorating for the dance.”

Even through the fuzzy haze of fever, Megan recognized the unique sound only her mother’s heels could make against the floor. That tapping and rhythm, that sound, was Mom’s. *But don’t make a fuss tonight, Mom. And please don’t turn my light on.*

Megan let out a small breath of relief when Nora turned a light on in the kitchen. Its gentle reach made its way softly around the corner and into the small hallway outside Megan’s open bedroom door. *That’s enough. No more. Please.* She could hear her mother doing something in the kitchen. Then her footsteps approaching.

“Megan? You’re in bed?” Nora asked, leaning against the doorframe. “Why so early?”

Megan wanted to respond, but it just seemed like so much effort. A quirk instantly recognized by a mother.

“Are you okay, honey?” Nora asked as she instinctively reached to feel Megan’s forehead.

Megan soaked in the seconds of her mother’s comforting touch.

“You might have a fever. What’s going on? When did—?”

Megan forced a dry swallow, clinging to what she had guarded as hope.

“Na—na—thing, Mom. Whew. I just—just let me sleep. Whew. I—I think—” Megan forced the words out, in between short, deliberate breaths to combat nausea. “Whew. Ate sumfin—bad—at lunch. I—be fine. Whew.”

“All right,” Nora allowed, not fully buying it. “I’ll check on you a little later. I’m going to make dinner. But if you’re not better in the morning, you’re staying home. Dance or no dance.”

Oddly, Megan didn’t necessarily feel disappointed by what her mother had just said. Fever, exhaustion, and pain were upstaging her once closely guarded interest in the dance. The nailhead was beginning to gain the upper hand.

After finishing dinner alone at the small kitchen table, Nora brought her dishes to the sink, then tied on an apron to protect her skirt. She rinsed, washed, and placed the dripping-wet pieces in the adjacent dish rack. Oops. That lipstick residue was tough. Why didn’t it stay that well on her lips? After an aggressive redo on the rim, Nora set the glass to dry next to her other dishes. She wiped her hands on the convenient apron before taking it off, then hung it back on a hook next to the refrigerator. After stalling for what she felt was sufficient time to convince herself she wasn’t being an over-worrying mother, Nora went back to check on Megan.

She turned on the small wall sconce in the short hallway that led to Megan’s bedroom and to her own. The lamp cast an angle of light into Megan’s darkened room, enabling Nora to make out her daughter’s twin bed and nightstand. Megan appeared to be sleeping peacefully, but to appease that persistent motherly instinct, Nora walked over to Megan’s bed and leaned in close to her daughter’s face. Yes. Megan was breathing. Yes, that was definitely breathing. Satisfied, Nora turned to leave. She started to close the door to Megan’s bedroom on her way out, but second thoughts suggested otherwise. Leave the door partially open.