

Oh my, how embarrassing. Now I had to tell my daughter's teacher how sorry I was because I had called her a "big stupid cow". Of course, Maja would never have ratted me out, but unfortunately her BFF Leonie was also present when I committed this faux pas. (If I had only used the words "gargantuan ignorant bovine", she probably wouldn't have been able to remember and repeat them correctly. But now, I had an irate member of our primary school's work force on the phone, plus the problem of setting a very bad example for my children.)

To tell the story from the beginning: basically I had just wanted to make a quick stopover at my house to change into my party clothes. Instead of hosting our annual department Christmas do with mulled wine and cookies at the office, our boss had booked a table at "Da Vinci", including fancy hors d'oeuvres and cocktails, and Marliese was the designated driver. I was really looking forward to it and had asked my mother to babysit because Gregor had to work the late shift.

That it might be difficult to leave the house as quickly as I had planned became clear as soon as I entered the main door. I heard Max's gut-wrenching sobs and looked into my mother's reproachful face. "About time you got here", she said pointedly. "These days, you really wonder what those education experts are up to."

I ran towards Max and pulled him into my lap. "What's wrong?" I asked him. "Did something happen in kindergarten?"

He could hardly speak from crying. "Santa Claus drowned!" he finally uttered. "And it's my fault because I put the pirate ship on my wish list!"

"How did you get that idea?" I asked him, rather stunned.

"That's what Ms Pütter told Maja's class at school! Now there's no more Santa Claus because he wanted to get my pirate ship and he drowned!"

"But Max", I said while rubbing his back to calm him down, "he wouldn't have to get into the water to fetch your pirate ship because that's in the toy factory!" As I was looking around, I discovered Maja lurking next to the doorframe, together with her friend Leonie, bad conscience personified.

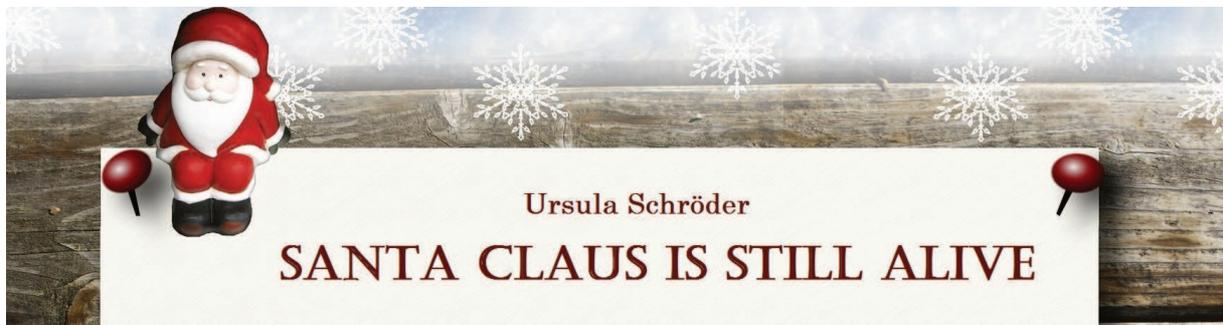
"Come over here!" I ordered. "What's with this Santa Claus story?"

First, she hesitated, but then she confirmed the whole thing. "That's what Ms Pütter said! Santa Claus is dead. He was alive, but he died. That's what she told our class at school!" Leonie nodded to corroborate this.

"What a nonsense!" I said sharply. That Max was still shedding dramatic tears in my arms didn't make me any calmer.

"But what Ms Pütter says is true!" said Maja in a challenging tone. "Just as she said that we must say 'he doesn't have any money' instead of 'he doesn't have no money'. And you said that she's right, too, Mom."

"That's something completely different."



"I won't get any Christmas presents!" Max wailed, grammatically correct while nobody cared. "Never again!"

I hugged him closer. Now was the time I was supposed to leave the house and get into Marliese's car. But neither could I leave him in this state nor would my mother allow it. "Of course you'll get your Christmas presents!" I tried to soothe him. "Just because a big stupid cow says that Santa Claus is dead, it doesn't prove anything."

That actually gave him pause. "Big stupid cow?" he repeated. Two red-rimmed eyes grinned at me. Two little girls started to giggle. And I realized that I had made a colossal mistake.

The next day, Ms Pütter called me right after school to complain. She could not tolerate my undermining her authority at school if I talked about her with such a lack of respect.

I was still rather upset, having had to cancel my department Christmas party because of her and letting Max sleep in my bed, so I said: "And I can't tolerate you telling the children these grueling stories about a drowned Santa Claus without even checking with us parents first! My son was absolutely shocked!"

Ms Pütter kept quiet for a second. "Santa Claus? Drowned? What do you mean?"

"That's what I'm asking you!" I said. "Since it was you who told the class about it yesterday!"

"I did not!" she replied. "I have no idea... Oh, wait, yes. We talked about St. Nicholas of Myra. I tried to show the children how, over the centuries, this historic person turned into today's image of Santa Claus. And if you attended our last PTA meeting, you'd know that this was totally agreed upon."

Of course I had attended that meeting but I could not recall all the details. "Well, that's fine, but how come the kids came up with this story of drowning?"

"I truly don't know", Ms Pütter said. "The only explanation I have is telling them that he was the patron of seafarers. Do you think ...?"

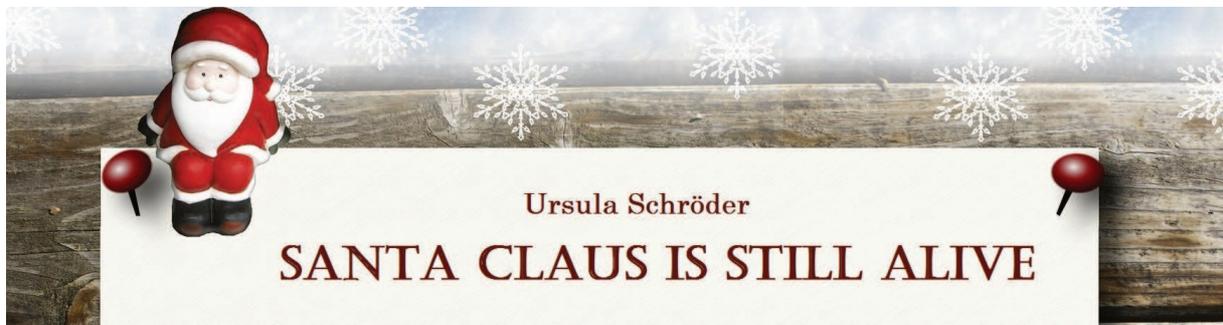
I was not willing to let her off the hook that easily. Once again, I questioned Maja. She insisted on the drowning element. "Really, Mom", she said. "He drowned. In Turkey. Just like Simone's uncle."

That stirred a memory. Last summer, the brother of Simone's mother had indeed died after a bathing incident in Antalya. The whole class had been rather shaken by it. "But why did Ms Pütter tell you that? What did Simone say, by the way?"

"I don't know", said my daughter. "I didn't hear it myself. I was in the gym at the time, rehearsing with Ms Lange for our nativity play."

I looked at her, dumbfounded. "And how do you know that Ms Pütter said that?"

She shrugged. "Because Leonie told me afterwards when we came back."



“What exactly did Leonie say?”, I wanted to know.

“I think she said: ‘Santa Claus died in Turkey. Just like Simone’s uncle did.’ We were all really sad after that. Linda even cried.”

No more questions, Your Honor. I just found out how rumors come to life. With a certain degree of remorse, I thought about having to call Ms Pütter and tell her about these new insights. I had to put things right, if only to be a good role model for my offspring.

I watched Max, happily digging into his fish fingers. “Well, aren’t you glad?”, I asked him. “Santa didn’t drown after all!”

He nodded, his chubby little cheeks filled to capacity, and mumbled something unintelligible which seemed to include the words “Pirate Ship”. Obviously, his delicate soul had not suffered any permanent damage.

Maja, meanwhile, was pushing her fries about on her plate. “Mom”, she said thoughtfully, “today Ms Lange said that Luca’s grandpa was a vampire.”

I bit my lips. No way was I going to comment on that spontaneously before knowing all the facts from different angles. After all, I hate to make the same mistake twice.