

# A Reading Lesson

By Brett Aronowitz

I played with dolls, listened to *Peter and the Wolf*, *Tubby the Tuba*, *Mother Goose Rhymes* and the soundtrack from *The Jetsons* on my parent's fancy stereo system. Like every other girl my age, I wanted a *Barbie* and a *Kenner Easy Bake Oven*. Overall, things weren't bad.

That is, until the approach of Christmas heightened tension around our house.

You see, my Jewish parents just didn't know how to do Christmas. They were inept, sheer duds, much as I feel today. They struggled with the whole religious scene, while at the same time coming face to face with an ever-mounting pile of debt.

At the top of the tall tree in our living room, purchased with Hannukah gelt our aunts had had given us, was a solitary star cut from cardboard and covered with tin foil. I was five years old, as I stared, wondering why our tree still wasn't decorated, and why no presents had magically begun to accumulate underneath, as they had next door at the O'Reagans.

Would Santa come, or would he pass over our house and forget all about us? Everything seemed bleak. Did he know we were Jewish? Could he hear my parent's continuous bickering the way I remember it superimposed on the smell of pine? Were they too naughty? Was I?

Finally on Christmas Eve, my parents came to a truce.

"Let's go for a ride," my father said.

My mother bundled up my brothers and me and we piled into our dirty white Chevy station wagon. My dad drove to *Two Guys*, the nearest in a chain of bargain department stores open late on Christmas Eve, at a time when blue laws were still enforced.

Once inside, my mother asked, "If you could tell Santa Claus what you want for Christmas, what would it be?"

When I turned to make sure I'd really heard her correctly, she'd already disappeared from sight. I began combing each aisle, searching for the toy I'd had my heart set on for months. I wanted to bake tiny cakes with my own special oven, heated by a sixty-watt bulb. I'd seen the commercials so often that even though I was just learning to read, I could instantly recognize the pink Easy Bake logo on the package. The shelves were now half empty (this being Christmas Eve), and I wandered through the store until I spotted the logo. I ran and ran and found my mother.

"Mom, I found it!"

I took her hand, led her to the spot and pointed to the top shelf.

"This is what you want?"

I nodded.

"Are you sure?"

We stayed in the store until my brothers had taken their turn showing what they wanted from Santa. Then we were escorted out to the icy car.

"You kids wait here," my dad said.

They went back in the store while we huddled together, trying to keep warm. Half an hour later they returned with several armloads of teal-colored *Two Guys* bags and stuffed them behind the back seat.

Did they think we were stupid?

The next morning, I awoke to find a long, thin package under the tree with my name on it. It was marked "From Santa." I tore it open, thrilled I would finally get the little oven I'd coveted. But something didn't make sense. It wasn't shaped right. It didn't look the same as what I'd seen on those Saturday morning commercials. With tears in my eyes, I said, "Mom... it's not an Easy Bake Oven."

"It's what you asked Santa for."

"What is it, Mom?" I asked.

"Sound it out."

I hated those words. My mother had

endlessly repeated them to my brother Myles, who was hooked on TV. She claimed he started to read only after she'd refused to read him TV Guide. Now that he could read by himself, she'd started reciting those same words to me.

It took a while, sounding out the letters on the box the way I'd been taught at school.

"P-o-p...c-orn...pop-per?"

Maybe Santa had trouble sounding it out too, because what I got that Christmas was a popcorn-popping accessory to the oven I'd wanted so badly. I also got quite a reading lesson.

It might as well have been coal.

