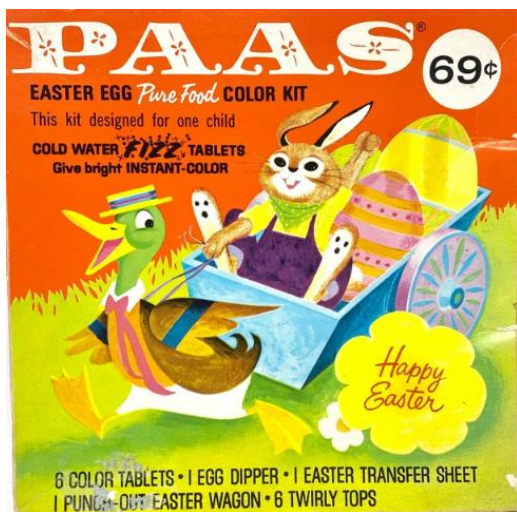


Easter

When I was seven or eight and learned that Santa Claus was not a jolly old elf who came down our non-existent chimney, I was not at all dismayed; in fact, I was pleased with the semi-adult feeling of guarding the myth for the enjoyment of my younger brother and sister. Also, I had never been much involved in the activities of the tooth fairy; in fact, it seemed quite natural for that creature to be fostered by Mother and Daddy's coins - a dime for most teeth, as I remember. There was one childhood myth I did not, however, want to generalize out of existence - the Easter bunny. I continued to believe. I was well aware of Easter as a solemn religious observation; the Easter bunny was quite separate and a creature to cherish.

At our house, the secular Easter celebration began on Saturday when Mother hard-cooked a quantity of eggs (I'm not sure, but I would guess a dozen or a dozen and a half, both nicely divisible among the three children). Martha, Brother, and I anxiously waited for the hot eggs to cool sufficiently to enable us to handle them but not so much that they did not accept the beautiful clear dyes achieved by dissolving the dark colored tablets in a number of Pyrex custard cups. We carefully cut out the decals which we would later decide to put on certain eggs by wrapping the egg and decal with a vinegar-saturated cloth to transfer the bunny or chick design to the colored egg shell. It was much fun to cradle an egg in the brass wire gadget that came in the Paas dye package, ease the egg into the dye bath, move it around carefully to be sure that all sides were covered with the selected blue, yellow, orange, green, or red colors. Then the eggs were placed in an egg carton to finish their cooling and to await any further design we might wish to add. Sometimes we would be daring and mix red and blue to try to get the clear purple we coveted for a couple of the eggs. Once or twice, we experimented with some country dye methods Daddy suggested, such as onion skins which produced a lovely crinkled purple pattern. Once, I persuaded Martha and Brother to mix all the colors for the final egg. We were greatly disappointed to see the dull, yucky (as we said, even then) brown which resulted.



After we spent sufficient time admiring our beautiful eggs, we prepared the baskets we had saved from the previous year, inserting new "grass" and tying a perky bow around the handle to indicate ownership, followed by dividing the eggs among us and placing them artistically in our baskets. Then we placed the baskets in the living room in a neat row to await the inside visit of the Easter bunny overnight. We never played with the eggs on Saturday lest we crack one and spoil it for its reappearance the next morning.

If the weather was pretty (and I mostly remember its being clear, otherwise the hunt took place in the house), we awoke Sunday morning to find a few candy eggs and some jelly beans, sometimes even a chocolate rabbit or a spun-sugar peep show, replacing the eggs we had dyed. Then we ventured into the backyard to hunt for the eggs hidden by that busy bunny. We knew it had been busy for we could see or hear other children in the neighborhood searching for their hidden treasures. We would learn later in the day that some of them found candy eggs outside, but we never did. We understood that *our* bunny considered unwrapped candy eggs to be fine items for our baskets but not for hiding on the ground. Somehow, I never did question the logic of the bunny's hygienic consideration at our house but not at other houses - other houses, other customs, I suppose. Couldn't anything as skilled as a bunny which covered so much ground so quickly be permitted to have other ways of doing things? Some of the other kids didn't dye eggs, or if they did, the eggs weren't turned over to the bunny. Our bunny sometimes re-dyed some of the eggs we'd done, often adding a few more dyed hen eggs. And there were the rare, exciting occasions when it added a dyed goose or duck egg as a wonderful surprise for the alert boy or girl who found it.

After Sunday School, we would return home to take turns hiding all the eggs and finding them again. I almost spoiled the game forever when I decided that Mother's prize tulips, in full and glorious bloom the Easter I was six, were an ideal place to secrete an egg or two. I figured the hen eggs were too heavy, but I didn't see why the smaller candy eggs, whose shapes so exactly matched the shape of the tulip blooms, weren't perfect for the blossoms. I carefully matched color of egg to its blossom. When Martha and Brother returned to look for the eggs, alas, the weight of the eggs had been too much for the graceful stems of the tulips, bending them double. They didn't return to the upright position after they had shed their burdens, either. We weren't allowed to hide any more eggs the rest of the day. I had to live with the silent but obvious disapproval of my siblings. The following year, aged seven, I was deemed mature enough to have learned my lesson and to find more appropriate hiding places for our treasures. And, anyway, the tulips had finished blooming that year!

Even after Ruth and Roland were born, when I was twelve, I was still looking forward to Easter and the egg ceremonies. In the twins' second year, Daddy's childless brother and sister-in-law were visiting us. Uncle Tom and Aunt Tina pointedly provided lavish Easter baskets for the toddling twins but none for the "grown-up" nine-, eleven-, and thirteen-year-olds. I was crushed. Of course, I reasoned, there was no "real" Easter bunny, but the idea had provided such fun for so long that I didn't see why it had to cease then. After all, the magic of Santa Claus continued forever after the mystery had been solved. Why not Easter?