

When I was fourteen years old I was in love with two girls. Deirdre was tall and willowy, with beautiful blonde waist-length hair. Bronwyn had glossy brunette hair, glasses, and a fierce intelligence. One dark December afternoon, Bronwyn and Deirdre approached me and said they wanted to ask me a really really really Really big favour.

“Would you be the Santa Claus for our United Church Sunday school Christmas party?”

“Me?”

“Yes,” they responded.

“I’m only fourteen.”

“The suit and the beard will make you look old enough,” ventured Deirdre.

“And they’re really little kids; they think we’re old,” offered Bronwyn.

“I don’t know...” I mumbled.

“Oh you’ll be great. Meet us at the church hall on Saturday morning at 9:30. You’ll hand out a few presents, and you’ll be done. Easy.”

To say I was fourteen was a slight exaggeration, as I was just about to turn fourteen. Only five years earlier I had still *believed* in Santa Claus. When I was eight, on Easter eve, I asked my mother if we had any carrots or cookies to leave out for the Easter Bunny. She was probably tired, or bored, but whatever the reason, she sighed and said, “I don’t think there’s any point.”

To this day I don’t think she meant to cut the cord to my childhood - I think she meant the Bunny gets so much food he can’t eat it all. But what I heard was: There is no Easter Bunny. I looked up at her and said, “There isn’t any Santa Claus either, is there?” She considered for about two seconds, and responded. “No.”

I was devastated and exhilarated at the same time. There was no Santa? Then who had been bringing that stuff all my life? My parents? Of course! That’s why I never got what I wanted. And more importantly, did everyone know? I was amazed by the power of the collective scam. That every pre-teen and teenager and adult and grandparent would band together to make something magical - for children? That was beautiful. It was also horrifying. What else was a lie? It didn’t matter. Suddenly it dawned on me. I was now part of the magic. For all the little ones!

Saturday morning I arrived at the church hall early. When Deirdre and her father drove up, Mr. Danbrook looked at me with one eyebrow raised, said "Good Luck", and turned back toward home. Bronwyn arrived, and with a few elderly lady volunteers we made our way into the empty hall.

Deirdre laid out the plan: "We'll come and get you when the kids are singing "Here Comes Santa Claus". You'll make one circle of the room yelling "Ho Ho Ho". We'll bring the kids up one at a time - there will be maybe fifteen of them - you'll give them each a present, Bronwyn will give them a bag of candy, then you'll yell "Merry Christmas", run around the room again, and back to the dressing room to change. The whole thing should be over in ten minutes tops. Got it?"

"I think so."

We walked out of the hall and around the corner, and faced a long hallway. At the far end was a door marked Janitor. Deirdre opened it with one of the keys she's been given by her father, and dropped the green garbage bag containing my costume.

"Start with the pants, and the boots, then call me so I can help you with the pillows and the rest." She turned and was gone. "And lock the door!"

I looked around the tiny crowded room. It was a broom closet. It was crammed full of mops, pails, paper towels, and boxes of that horrid green sawdust that janitors used to mop up kids' vomit. They would sprinkle it over the mess, until it was rendered solid enough to be picked up in a shovel. We called it "Puke Up".

I took off my coat, boots and jeans very quickly, and got into Santa's huge red pants. I was looking down at the cavernous gap between my own waist and the size 52 pants, when there was a knock at the door.

"How's it coming?" Deirdre was back.

"Well not bad, but everything's pretty big."

"Let me in." I opened the door. "Well it's supposed to be, so there's room for the pillows."

"I won't be able to walk in those boots."

"You'll get used to them."