

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."

She was stuffing a few queen-sized pillows into my pants. I turned to see an elderly janitor standing in the doorway.

“Excuse us!” Dierdre yelled, slamming the door in his face. “Okay try the jacket.”

I put it on, and it too was about fifteen sizes too big. It made me look emaciated.

“We’ve got more pillows.” She stuffed a few up the jacket, and I looked like I had giant boobs.

“Didn’t you put the belt on?”

“There was no belt.”

We decided to use my belt, even though the cinched waist made me look like a twisted balloon, and the pillows made a strange goiter-like thing happen to my groin.

The wig was a short curly white thing, that made me look like Angela Lansbury. Even with the beard I looked like a strange skinny woman in a red fat suit.

“The kids won’t care. All they want is candy,” she said.

Another bang at the door. It was Bronwyn. “What’s taking so long? The kids are here, we’ve started the games.” She threw open the door, and screamed. “Mother of God!”

We added the hat, and Bronwyn found a pair of glasses on the floor. “They’ll make you look older.” I tried them on. I looked like Granny Clampet.

We could hear screaming coming from the hall. It was the children, caterwauling like they were being tortured.

“Are you ready?”

“I think so.”

“Let’s hear your Ho Ho Ho.”

“Ho ho ho.”

“Say it lower. More manly.”

“Ho Ho Ho.” I sounded like the Mayor of Munchkinland.

“That’s perfect.” said Diedre.

“They’re gonna love you,” said Bronwyn.

The girls were gone in a flash. Looking around, I realized I had no bag of toys. Santa always has a bag over his shoulder. I was starting to sweat. The glasses slipped off my nose and fell. I bent over to pick them up, and I felt a pop. My belt had broken.

There was a loud banging at the door. "Who is it?"

"It's me!" said Bronwyn. I opened the door and she shoved a huge bag of toys into the room. "We're going into Here Comes Santa!" She ran off down the hall, and I heard the piano banging out the intro. The kids cheered. They knew that when they sang that song, they conjured Santa. Their singing had a demented quality to it, like they were screaming each line.

You'd better watch out!

Better not cry!

I took a deep breath, and threw the bag of toys over my shoulder. I made sure the door was unlocked, and looked the length of the empty hallway. As I started to move down it, I tried to jog a bit. Then to run. I tripped and went down hard. The pillows shifted as I struggled to my feet. The kids were already into the second verse. I tried to run again but the pants began to fall. I hiked them up with my free hand so they wouldn't get under the clown boots. When I got to the door - it was locked! I banged on it, but the din inside made it impossible to hear. I tried my heartiest "Ho Ho Ho." Nothing. "HO! HO! HO!" Still nothing. Deciding to bust my way in, I backed up about five steps, and took off like a crimson streak. Just as I turned my shoulder into the door, someone opened it from the inside.

I sailed into the room and took about seven tripping steps before I sprawled onto my stomach. The kids screamed even louder. They were seated in a large circle, and dove towards me when I skid to a stop. Bronwyn, Deirdre and the elderly ladies grabbed the kids and tried to restrain them from tearing me apart. I rolled onto my side with a great effort, and fought my way to my feet. I let out my heartiest "Ho Ho Ho", and started to run my victory lap around the room. As I moved past each child, the screaming stopped and was replaced with a look of horror. Even some of the older ladies looked dismayed. Deirdre waved me down, and cut my run short.

"Just get to the throne! We'll start the kids coming up."

I made a tight circle of the large red chair, threw the toy bag beside it, and plopped myself down. Immediately all the pillows rammed themselves up against my chin. Now I had boobs, a gut and a distended groin. I could see nothing through the steamed glasses, but couldn't take them off for fear of being revealed as a fraud. I used a bit of wig hair to smudge them as best I could. There, before me, was the first sweetheart.

"And were you a good little girl this year Leesa?" I prompted, reading the large name tag on her chest. It was going very well. Leesa looked at me like I was the assassin who'd taken her family. Her face started to contort; then settled into a scream. We all cringed at the force of it. I tried to hand her a present, but this only caused an increase in the intensity of the noise. Several women rushed in to whisk her away, and one of them wrenched the gift from my hand as they fled.

I didn't say a word to the next two. A boy and girl who laughed in my face as they took their gifts. The next little boy wouldn't come forward. He looked like he was only three or four, and was much too young to face a mixed-gender Santa. He dug in his heels, and started to claw the air as one of the women dragged him forward. I tried to smile, to reassure little Bobby that I meant no harm, but that only increased his panic. A few more women jumped in to lend a hand, and help with the forced march toward Satan. Bobby was almost within reach now, and had managed to twist himself away from me in abject fear. I tried to distract him with his present, and shook it near his head to entice him. Suddenly he stopped his struggle, and relaxed. A few of the ladies smiled and released their grip, and he turned toward me calmly. Projectile vomit sailed from his mouth. The force of it sent him flying backwards, and the bulk landed in a large puddle at my feet. The boy and his gift were pulled away, and the old janitor was there in an instant with the Puke Up. He sneered at me as he stirred the blob into a green gruel.

Bronwyn and Deirdre turned my chair with brute force to avoid the mess, and kept the kids coming. The next five or six went by in a flash. I would barely get the present out of the bag, before the little darling would snatch it from my hand, grab the candy, and scurry back to a corner.

It looked like we might be nearing the end. It hadn't gone too badly, all things considered. But lo and behold, one last boy was being ushered toward me. The name on his tag said Roger. He looked about twelve; way too old to be at a children's Santa Claus party. He had a feral

quality about him; grey slitty eyes that were too close together, and an odd rodent-like head. He moved toward me slowly, and the room fell silent. The ladies gave him a wide berth, as if he had a shiv that they'd seen him use before. I swallowed, and tried to remain calm. He stood before me, and gave my Lady Claus look the once over. Then in a voice lower than mine he said: "If you're Santa, you can kiss my ass."

A few of the ladies gasped. I was going to give him a few savvy words like "Is that the kind of language we use in the House of the Lord?" but all I got out was, "Well -" Not even his name. The punch - when it came - was so fast, and so well-placed that I thought I'd been shot. He didn't wind up or draw his arm back, but jutted his fist straight up, with laser-like accuracy, directly into my solar plexus. His little hand found a space between Santa's bosoms and his gut, and knocked the wind out of me. I bent over, trying to breathe, but all that came out was "Fuuuuuuu....." The older ladies screamed, Leesa started howling again, and the rest of the children cheered. Before he could finish me off, Bronwyn and Deirdre were on him like Secret Service agents, and the little killer was wrestled to the ground and hauled from the room.

My glasses had fallen to the floor. I tried to catch my breath, but my diaphragm had flipped over, and I no longer knew how to take in air. I looked up at the jeering children, and had only one thought: run. I tried to stand up, and that effort forced some air back into my empty lungs. I hiked up my pants, and started to move toward the door. The children dropped their bits of toy detritus and empty candy bags, and without a word, started to move in. I circled away from the door when I saw them coming, and the kids, chanting "Santa! Santa!" started to swing in behind me like a pack of wolves. When I had picked up enough speed I flew toward the door and knocked it open with my free hand. I was, as Deirdre had predicted, getting used to moving in the over-sized boots. I was running for my life. I made it down the long hallway and into the janitor's room, slammed and locked the door just as the first kid smashed himself into it. As more and more of their small, determined bodies hit the grey metal, and the cries grew more frantic, I knew I had to get out. I turned to the window and fumbled with the lock. It had been painted shut! The door was starting to shake loose from its hinges, when suddenly, above the pandemonium, I heard a scream of "NO!" Deirdre and Bronwyn had come to my rescue. I could

hear children being torn from the door, and hurled down the hallway. "Get back in that hall! We're Not! Finished! Singing!"

Now I knew why I loved these women. They were my protectors. My saviours! Soon there was a lull in the uproar outside the door, with only the odd no-nonsense "Get Moving!" echoing from far away. I peeled off the hat and wig, and pulled the beard from inside my mouth, when a timid Deirdre called from outside the door.

"Are you all right?"

I was breathing again. I had most of my body parts intact.

"Ya. I'm just changing."

"Good. We'll meet you in the hall in about ten minutes. The ladies like to have tea after the party." Tea? No one had mentioned anything about tea.

"And we have cookies. And the kids will be gone."

When I came out of the room, the janitor was standing there, waiting. He leered at me again, but I wasn't fazed. I had survived something. I winked at him as I passed. What the wink signified, I had no idea. It seemed like a manly thing to do. Let him decide what it meant.

A short while later the tea was served, and the ladies and I sat around a large rectangular table. This being the United Church, not much was said. One of the elderly ladies broke the silence with a sweet "Well, that was nice." About four minutes of quiet followed, broken only by the muffled munching of dry shortbread, and the stifled clink of cup on saucer.

I glanced over at Dierdre and Bronwyn. They smiled meekly in return. They owed me. I took another cookie, and snapped off half of it in my mouth. Now I understood why Dierdre's father had wished me Good Luck. I had learned a man-lesson. I was a step closer to man hood. And I had done it - I had made something; something like magic - for the children.