DAVID SEDARIS
SANTALAND DIARIES

AS READ ON BBC RADIO 4
Santa Land Diaries
Santa Land Diaries

Santa Land Diaries

I was in a coffee shop looking through the want ads when I read, “Macy's Herald Square, the largest store in the world, has big opportunities for outgoing, fun-loving people of all shapes and sizes who want more than just a holiday job! Working as an elf in Macy's SantaLand means being at the center of the excitement. . . .”

I circled the ad and then I laughed out loud at the thought of it. The man seated next to me turned on his stool, checking to see if I was a lunatic. I continued to laugh, quietly. Yesterday I applied for a job at UPS. They are hiring drivers’ helpers for the upcoming Christmas season and I went to their headquarters filled with hope. In line with three hundred other men and women my hope diminished. During the brief interview I was asked why I wanted to work for UPS and I answered that I wanted to work for UPS because I like the brown uniforms. What did they expect me to say?

“I'd like to work for UPS because, in my opinion, it's an opportunity to showcase my substantial leadership skills in one of the finest private delivery companies this country has seen since the Pony Express!”

I said I liked the uniforms and the UPS interviewer turned my application facedown on his desk and said, “Give me a break.”

I came home this afternoon and checked the machine for a message from UPS but the only message I got was from the company that holds my student loan, Sallie Mae. Sallie Mae sounds like a naive and barefoot hillbilly girl but in fact they are a ruthless and aggressive conglomeration of bullies located in a tall brick building somewhere in Kansas. I picture it to be the tallest building in that state and I have decided they hire their employees straight out of prison. It scares me.

The woman at Macy's asked, “Would you be interested in full-time elf or evening and weekend elf?”

I said, “Full-time elf.”

I have an appointment next Wednesday at noon.

I am a thirty-three-year-old man applying for a job as an elf.

I often see people on the streets dressed as objects and handing out leaflets. I tend to avoid leaflets but it breaks my heart to see a grown man dressed as a taco. So, if there is a costume involved, I tend not only to accept the leaflet, but to accept it graciously, saying, “Thank you so much,” and thinking, You poor, pathetic son of a bitch. I don't know what you have but I hope I never catch it. This afternoon on Lexington Avenue I accepted a leaflet from a man dressed as a camcorder. Hot dogs, peanuts, tacos, video cameras, these things make me sad because they don't fit in on the streets. In a parade, maybe, but not on the streets. I figure that at least as an elf I will have a place; I'll be in Santa's Village with all the other elves. We will reside in a fluffy wonderland surrounded by candy canes and gingerbread shacks. It won't be quite as sad as standing on some street corner dressed as a french fry.

I am trying to look on the bright side. I arrived in New York three weeks ago with high hopes, hopes that have been challenged. In my imagination I’d go straight from Penn Station to the offices of “One Life to Live,” where I would drop off my bags and spruce up before heading off for drinks with Cord Roberts and Victoria Buchannon, the show's greatest stars. We'd sit in a plush booth at a tony cocktail lounge where my new celebrity friends would lift their frosty glasses in my direction and say, “A toast to David Sedaris, the best writer this show has ever had!!”

I'd say, “You guys, cut it out.” It was my plan to act modest.

People at surrounding tables would stare at us, whispering, “Isn't that. . . ? Isn't that. . . ?”

I might be distracted by their enthusiasm and Victoria Buchannon would lay her hand over mine and tell me that I’d better get used to being the center of attention.

But instead I am applying for a job as an elf. Even worse than applying is the very real possibility that I will not be hired, that I couldn't even find work as an elf. That's when you know you're a failure.

This afternoon I sat in the eighth-floor Santa-Land office and was told, “Congratulations, Mr. Sedaris. You are an elf.”

In order to become an elf I filled out ten pages’ worth of forms, took a multiple choice personality test, underwent two interviews, and submitted urine for a drug test. The first interview was general, designed to eliminate the obvious sociopaths. During the second interview we were asked why we wanted to be elves. This is always a problem question. I listened as the woman ahead of me, a former waitress, answered the question, saying, “I really want to be an elf? Because I think it's about acting? And before this I worked in a restaurant? Which was run by this really wonderful woman who had a dream to open a restaurant? And it made me realize
that it's really really . . . important to have a . . . dream?"

Everything this woman said, every phrase and sentence, was punctuated with a question mark and the interviewer never raised an eyebrow.

When it was my turn I explained that I wanted to be an elf because it was one of the most frightening career opportunities I had ever come across. The interviewer raised her face from my application and said, “And . . . ?”

I'm certain that I failed my drug test. My urine had roaches and stems floating in it, but still they hired me because I am short, five feet five inches. Almost everyone they hired is short. One is a dwarf. After the second interview I was brought to the manager's office, where I was shown a floor plan. On a busy day twenty-two thousand people come to visit Santa, and I was told that it is an elf's lot to remain merry in the face of torment and adversity. I promised to keep that in mind.

I spent my eight-hour day with fifty elves and one perky, well-meaning instructor in an enormous Macy's classroom, the walls of which were lined with NCR 2152's. A 2152, I have come to understand, is a cash register. The class was broken up into study groups and given assignments. My group included several returning elves and a few experienced cashiers who tried helping me by saying things like, “Don't you even know your personal ID code? Jesus, I had mine memorized by ten o'clock.”

Everything about the cash register intimidates me. Each procedure involves a series of codes: separate numbers for cash, checks, and each type of credit card. The term Void has gained prominence as the filthiest four-letter word in my vocabulary. Voids are a nightmare of paperwork and coded numbers, everything produced in triplicate and initialed by the employee and his supervisor.

Leaving the building tonight I could not shake the mental picture of myself being stoned to death by restless, angry customers, their nerves shattered by my complete lack of skill. I tell myself that I will simply pry open my register and accept anything they want to give me — beads, cash, watches, whatever. I'll negotiate and swap. I'll stomp their credit cards through the masher, write “Nice Knowing You!” along the bottom of the slip and leave it at that.

All we sell in SantaLand are photos. People sit upon Santa's lap and pose for a picture. The Photo Elf hands them a slip of paper with a number printed along the top. The form is filled out by another elf and the picture arrives by mail weeks later. So really, all we sell is the idea of a picture. One idea costs nine dollars, three ideas cost eighteen.

My worst nightmare involves twenty-two thousand people a day standing before my register. I won't always be a cashier, just once in a while. The worst part is that after I have accumulated three hundred dollars I have to remove two hundred, fill out half a dozen forms, and run the envelope of cash to the drop in the China Department or to the vault on the balcony above the first floor. I am not allowed to change my clothes beforehand. I have to go dressed as an elf. An elf in SantaLand is one thing, an elf in Sportswear is something else altogether.
This afternoon we were given presentations and speeches in a windowless conference room crowded with desks and plastic chairs. We were told that during the second week of December, SantaLand is host to “Operation Special Children,” at which time poor children receive free gifts donated by the store. There is another morning set aside for terribly sick and deformed children. On that day it is an elf’s job to greet the child at the Magic Tree and jog back to the house to brace our Santa.

“The next one is missing a nose,” or “Crystal has third-degree burns covering 90 percent of her body.”

Missing a nose. With these children Santa has to be careful not to ask, “And what would you like for Christmas?”

We were given a lecture by the chief of security, who told us that Macy’s Herald Square suffers millions of dollars’ worth of employee theft per year. As a result the store treats its employees the way one might treat a felon with a long criminal record. Cash rewards are offered for turning people in and our bags are searched every time we leave the store. We were shown videotapes in which supposed former employees hang their head and rue the day they ever thought to steal that leather jacket. The actors faced the camera to explain how their arrests had ruined their friendships, family life, and, ultimately, their future.

One fellow stared at his hands and sighed, “There’s no way I’m going to be admitted into law school. Not now. Not after what I’ve done. Nope, no way.” He paused and shook his head of the unpleasant memory. “Oh, man, not after this. No way.”

A lonely, reflective girl sat in a coffee shop, considered her empty cup, and moaned, “I remember going out after work with all my Macy’s friends. God, those were good times. I loved those people.” She stared off into space for a few moments before continuing, “Well, needless to say, those friends aren’t calling anymore. This time I’ve really messed up. Why did I do it? Why?”

Macy’s has two jail cells on the balcony floor and it apprehends three thousand shoplifters a year. We were told to keep an eye out for pickpockets in SantaLand.

Interpreters for the deaf came and taught us to sign, “MERRY CHRISTMAS! I AM SANTA’S HELPER.” They told us to speak as we sign and to use bold, clear voices and bright facial expressions. They taught us to say, “YOU ARE A VERY PRETTY BOY/GIRL! I LOVE YOU! DO YOU WANT A SURPRISE?”

My sister Amy lives above a deaf girl and has learned quite a bit of sign language. She taught some to me and so now I am able to say, “SANTA HAS A TUMOR IN HIS HEAD THE SIZE OF AN OLIVE. MAYBE IT WILL GO AWAY TOMORROW BUT I DON’T THINK SO.”

This morning we were lectured by the Santa-Land managers and presented with a Xeroxed booklet of regulations titled “The Elfin Guide.” Most of the managers are former elves who have worked their way up the candy-cane ladder but retain vivid memories of their days in uniform. They closed the meeting saying, “I want you to remember that even if you are assigned Photo Elf on a busy weekend, YOU ARE NOT SANTA’S SLAVE.”

In the afternoon we were given a tour of SantaLand, which really is something. It’s beautiful, a real wonderland, with ten thousand sparkling lights, false snow, train sets, bridges, decorated trees, mechanical penguins and bears, and really tall candy canes. One enters and travels through a maze, a path which takes you from one festive environment to another. The path ends at the Magic Tree. The Tree is supposed to resemble a complex system of roots, but looks instead like a scale model of the human intestinal tract. Once you pass the Magic Tree, the light dims and an elf guides you to Santa’s house. The houses are cozy and intimate, laden with toys. You exit Santa’s house and are met with a line of cash registers.

We traveled the path a second time and were given the code names for various posts, such as “The Vomit Corner,” a mirrored wall near the Magic Tree, where nauseous children tend to surrender the contents of their stomachs. When someone vomits, the nearest elf is supposed to yell “VAMOOSE,” which is the name of the janitorial product used by the store. We were taken to the “Oh, My God, Corner,” a position near the escalator. People arriving see the long line and say “Oh, my God!” and it is an elf’s job to calm them down and explain that it will take no longer than an hour to see Santa.

On any given day you can be an Entrance Elf, a Water Cooler Elf, a Bridge Elf, Train Elf, Maze Elf, Island Elf, Magic Window Elf, Emergency Exit Elf, Counter Elf, Magic Tree Elf, Pointer Elf, Santa Elf, Photo Elf, Usher Elf, Cash Register Elf, Runner Elf, or Exit Elf. We were given a demonstration of the various
positions in action, performed by returning elves who were so animated and relentlessly cheerful that it embarrassed me to walk past them. I don't know that I could look someone in the eye and exclaim, “Oh, my goodness, I think I see Santa!” or “Can you close your eyes and make a very special Christmas wish?” Everything these elves said had an exclamation point at the end of it!!! It makes one's mouth hurt to speak with such forced merriment, I feel cornered when someone talks to me this way. Doesn't everyone? I prefer being frank with children. I'm more likely to say, “You must be exhausted,” or “I know a lot of people who would kill for that little waistline of yours.”

I am afraid I won't be able to provide the grinding enthusiasm Santa is asking for. I think I'll be a low-key sort of an elf.

Today was elf dress rehearsal. The lockers and dressing rooms are located on the eighth floor, directly behind SantaLand. Elves have gotten to know one another over the past four days of training but once we took off our clothes and put on the uniforms everything changed.

The woman in charge of costuming assigned us our outfits and gave us a lecture on keeping things clean. She held up a calendar and said, “Ladies, you know what this is. Use it. I have scraped enough blood out from the crotches of elf knickers to last me the rest of my life. And don't tell me, 'I don't wear underpants, I'm a dancer.' You're not a dancer. If you were a real dancer you wouldn't be here. You're an elf and you're going to wear panties like an elf.”

My costume is green. I wear green velvet knickers, a yellow turtleneck, a forest-green velvet smock, and a perky stocking cap decorated with spangles. This is my work uniform.

My elf name is Crumpet. We were allowed to choose our own names and given permission to change them according to our outlook on the snowy world.

Today was the official opening day of Santa-Land and I worked as a Magic Window Elf, a Santa Elf, and an Usher Elf. The Magic Window is located in the adult “Quick Peep” line. My job was to say, “Step on the Magic Star and look through the window, and you can see Santa!” I was at the Magic Window for fifteen minutes before a man approached me and said, “You look so fucking stupid.”

I have to admit that he had a point. But still, I wanted to say that at least I get paid to look stupid, that he gives it away for free. But I can't say things like that because I'm supposed to be merry. So instead I said, “Thank you!”

“Thank you!” as if I had misunderstood and thought he had said, “You look terrific.”

“Thank you!”

He was a brawny wise guy wearing a vinyl jacket and carrying a bag from Radio Shack. I should have said, real loud, “Sorry, man, I don't date other guys.”

Two New Jersey families came together to see Santa. Two loud, ugly husbands with two wives and four children between them. The children gathered around Santa and had their picture taken. When Santa asked the ten-year-old boy what he wanted for Christmas, his father shouted, “A WOMAN! GET HIM A WOMAN, SANTA!” These men were very rude and irritating, constantly laughing and jostling one another. The two women sat on Santa's lap and had their pictures taken and each asked Santa for a KitchenAid brand dishwasher and a decent winter coat. Then the husbands sat on Santa's lap and, when asked what he wanted for Christmas, one of the men yelled, “I WANT A BROAD WITH BIG TITS.” The man's small-breasted wife crossed her arms over her chest, looked at the floor, and gritted her teeth. The man's son tried to laugh.

Again this morning I got stuck at the Magic Window, which is really boring. I'm supposed to stand around and say, “Step on the Magic Star and you can see Santa!” I said that for a while and then I started saying, “Step on the Magic Star and you can see Cher!”

And people got excited. So I said, “Step on the Magic Star and you can see Mike Tyson!”

Some people in the other line, the line to sit on Santa's lap, got excited and cut through the gates so that they could stand on my Magic Star. Then they got angry when they looked through the Magic Window and saw Santa rather than Cher or Mike Tyson. What did they honestly expect? Is Cher so hard up for money that she'd agree to stand behind a two-way mirror at Macy's?

The angry people must have said something to management because I was taken off the Magic Star and sent to Elf Island, which is really boring as all you do is stand around and act merry. At noon a huge crowd of retarded people came to visit Santa and passed me on my little island. These people were profoundly retarded. They were rolling their eyes and wagging their tongues and staggering toward Santa. It was a large group of retarded people and after watching them for a few minutes I could not begin to guess where the retarded people ended and the regular New Yorkers began.

Everyone looks retarded once you set your mind to it.

This evening I was sent to be a Photo Elf, a job I enjoyed the first few times. The camera is hidden in the
fireplace and I take the picture by pressing a button at the end of a cord. The pictures arrive by mail weeks later and there is no way an elf can be identified and held accountable but still, you want to make it a good picture.

During our training we were shown photographs that had gone wrong, blurred frenzies of an elf's waving arm, a picture blocked by a stuffed animal, the yawning Santa. After every photograph an elf must remove the numbered form that appears at the bottom of the picture. A lazy or stupid elf could ruin an entire roll of film, causing eager families to pay for and later receive photographs of complete, beaming strangers.

Taking someone's picture tells you an awful lot, awful being the operative word. Having the parents in the room tends to make it even worse. It is the SantaLand policy to take a picture of every child, which the parent can either order or refuse. People are allowed to bring their own cameras, video recorders, whatever. It is the multimedia groups that exhaust me. These are parents bent over with equipment, relentless in their quest for documentation.

I see them in the Maze with their video cameras instructing their children to act surprised. “Monica, baby, look at the train set and look back at me. No, look at me. Now wave. That's right, wave hard.”

The parents hold up the line and it is a Maze Elf's job to hurry them along.

“Excuse me, sir, I'm sorry but we're sort of busy today and I'd appreciate it if you could maybe wrap this up. There are quite a few people behind you.”

The parent then asks you to stand beside the child and wave. I do so. I stand beside a child and wave to the video camera, wondering where I will wind up. I picture myself on the television set in a paneled room in Wapahanset or Easternmost Meadows. I imagine the family fighting over command of the remote control, hitting the fast-forward button. The child's wave becomes a rapid salute. I enter the picture and everyone in the room entertains the same thought: “What's that asshole doing on our Christmas Memory tape?”

The moment these people are waiting for is the encounter with Santa. As a Photo Elf I watch them enter the room and take control.

“All right, Ellen, I want you and Marcus to stand in front of Santa and when I say, 'now,' I want you to get onto his lap. Look at me now. Look at Daddy until I tell you to look at Santa.”

He will address his wife, who is working the still camera, and she will crouch low to the ground with her light meter and a Nikon with many attachments. It is heavy and the veins in her arms stand out.

Then there are the multimedia families in groups, who say, “All right, now let's get a shot of Anthony, Damascus, Theresa, Doug, Amy, Paul, and Vanity — can we squeeze them all together? Santa, how about you let Doug sit on your shoulders, can we do that?”

During these visits the children are rarely allowed to discuss their desires with Santa. They are too busy being art-directed by the parents.

“Vanity and Damascus, look over here, no, look here.”

“Santa, can you put your arm around Amy and shake hands with Paul at the same time?”

“That's good. That's nice.”

I have seen parents sit their child upon Santa's lap and immediately proceed to groom: combing hair, arranging a hemline, straightening a necktie. I saw a parent spray their child's hair, Santa treated as though he were a false prop made of cement, turning his head and wincing as the hair spray stung his eyes.

Young children, ages two to four, tend to be frightened of Santa. They have no interest in having their pictures taken because they don't know what a picture is. They're not vain, they're babies. They are babies and they act accordingly — they cry. A Photo Elf understands that, once a child starts crying, it's over. They start crying in Santa's house and they don't stop until they are at least ten blocks away.

When the child starts crying, Santa will offer comfort for a moment or two before saying, “Maybe we'll try again next year.”

The parents had planned to send the photos to relatives and place them in scrapbooks. They waited in line for over an hour and are not about to give up so easily. Tonight I saw a woman slap and shake her sobbing daughter, yelling, “Goddamn it, Rachel, get on that man's lap and smile or I'll give you something to cry about.”

I often take photographs of crying children. Even more grotesque is taking a picture of a crying child with a false grimace. It's not a smile so much as the forced shape of a smile. Oddly, it pleases the parents.

“Good girl, Rachel. Now, let's get the hell out of here. Your mother has a headache that won't quit until you're twenty-one.”

At least a third of Santa's visitors are adults: couples, and a surprising number of men and women alone. Most of the single people don't want to sit on Santa's lap; they just stop by to shake his hand and wish him luck. Often the single adults are foreigners who just happened to be shopping at Macy's and got bullied into the Maze by the Entrance Elf, whose job it is to hustle people in. One moment the foreigner is looking at china, and the
next thing he knows he is standing at the Magic Tree, where an elf holding a palm-sized counter is asking how many in his party are here to see Santa.

“How many in your party?”
The foreigner answers, “Yes.”
“How many in your party is not a yes or no question.”
“Yes.”

Then a Santa Elf leads the way to a house where the confused and exhausted visitor addresses a bearded man in a red suit, and says, “Yes, OK. Today I am good.” He shakes Santa's hand and runs, shaken, for the back door.

This afternoon a man came to visit Santa, a sloppy, good-looking man in his mid-forties. I thought he was another confused European, so I reassured him that many adults come to visit Santa, everyone is welcome. An hour later, I noticed the same man, back again to fellowship with Santa. I asked what he and Santa talk about, and in a cracked and puny voice he answered, “Toys. All the toys.”

I noticed a dent in the left side of his forehead. You could place an acorn in a dent like this. He waited in line and returned to visit a third time. On his final visit he got so excited he peed on Santa's lap.

So far in SantaLand, I have seen Simone from “General Hospital,” Shawn from “All My Children,” Walter Cronkite, and Phil Collins. Last year one of the elves was suspended after asking Goldie Hawn to autograph her hand. We have been instructed to leave the stars alone.

Walter Cronkite was very tall, and I probably wouldn't have recognized him unless someone had pointed him out to me. Phil Collins was small and well groomed. He arrived with his daughter and an entourage of three. I don't care about Phil Collins one way or the other but I saw some people who might and I felt it was my duty to tap them on the shoulder and say, “Look, there's Phil Collins!”

Many of Santa's visitors are from out of town and welcome the opportunity to view a celebrity, as it rounds out their New York experience. I'd point out Phil Collins and people would literally squeal with delight. Seeing as it is my job to make people happy, I didn't have any problem with it. Phil Collins wandered through the Maze, videotaping everything with his camcorder and enjoying himself. Once he entered the Magic Tree, he was no longer visible to the Maze audience, so I began telling people that if they left immediately and took a right at the end of the hall, they could probably catch up with Phil Collins after his visit with Santa. So they did.

People left. When Phil Collins walked out of SantaLand, there was a crowd of twenty people waiting for autographs. When the managers came looking for the big mouth, I said, “Phil Collins, who's he?”

I spent a few hours in the Maze with Puff, a young elf from Brooklyn. We were standing near the Lollipop Forest when we realized that Santa is an anagram of Satan. Father Christmas or the Devil — so close but yet so far. We imagined a SatanLand where visitors would wade through steaming pools of human blood and feces before arriving at the Gates of Hell, where a hideous imp in a singed velvet costume would take them by the hand and lead them toward Satan. Once we thought of it we couldn't get it out of our minds. Overhearing the customers we would substitute the word Satan for the word Santa.

“What do you think, Michael? Do you think Macy's has the real Satan?”

“Don't forget to thank Satan for the Baby Alive he gave you last year.”

“I love Satan.”

“Who doesn't? Everyone loves Satan.”

I would rather drive upholstery tacks into my gums than work as the Usher Elf. The Usher stands outside Santa's exit door and fills out the photo forms. While I enjoy trying to guess where people are from, I hate listening to couples bicker over how many copies they want.

It was interesting the first time I did it, but not anymore. While the parents make up their minds, the Usher has to prevent the excited children from entering Santa's back door to call out the names of three or four toys they had neglected to request earlier.

When things are slow, an Usher pokes in his head and watches Santa with his visitors. This afternoon we were slow and I watched a forty-year-old woman and her ancient mother step in to converse with Santa. The daughter wore a short pink dress, decorated with lace — the type of dress that a child might wear. Her hair was trained into pigtails and she wore ruffled socks and patent leather shoes. This forty-year-old girl ran to Santa and embraced him, driving rouge into his beard. She spoke in a baby voice and then lowered it to a whisper. When they left I asked if they wanted to purchase the photo and the biggest little girl in the world whispered something in her mother's ear and then she skipped away. She skipped. I watched her try and commune with the youngsters standing around the register until her mother pulled her away.

This morning I spent some time at the Magic Window with Sleighbell, an entertainer who is in the process of making a music video with her all-girl singing group. We talked about one thing and another, and she told
me that she has appeared on a few television shows, mainly soap operas. I asked if she has ever done “One Life to Live,” and she said, yes, she had a bit part as a flamenco dancer a few years ago when Cord and Tina remarried and traveled to Madrid for their honeymoon.

Suddenly I remembered Sleighbell perfectly. On that episode she wore a red lace dress and stomped upon a shiny nightclub floor until Spain’s greatest bullfighter entered, challenging Cord to a duel. Sleighbell intervened. She stopped dancing and said to Cord, “Don’t do it, Señor. You be a fool to fight with Spain’s greatest bullfighter!”

Sleighbell told me that the honeymoon was filmed here in the New York studio. That surprised me as I really thought it was shot in Spain. She told me that the dancing scene was shot in the late morning and afterwards there was a break for lunch. She took her lunch in the studio cafeteria and was holding her tray, when Tina waved her over to her table. Sleighbell had lunch with Tina! She said that Tina was very sweet and talked about her love for Smokey Robinson. I had read that Tina had driven a wedge between Smokey and his wife, but it was thrilling to hear it from someone who had the facts.

Later in the day I was put on the cash register where Andrea, one of the managers, told me that her friend Caroline was the person responsible for casting on “One Life to Live.” It was Caroline who replaced the old Tina with the new Tina. I loved the old Tina and will accept no substitutes, but I told Andrea that I liked the new Tina a lot, and she said, “I’ll pass that along to Caroline. She’ll be happy to hear it!” We were talking when Mitchell, another manager, got involved and said that he’d been on “One Life to Live” seven times. He played Clint’s lawyer five years ago when the entire Buchannon family was on trial for the murder of Mitch Laurence. Mitchell knows Victoria Buchannon personally and said that she’s just as sweet and caring in real life as she is on the show.

“She’s basically playing herself, except for the multiple personality disorder,” he said, pausing to verify a check on another elf’s register. He asked the customer for another form of ID, and while the woman cursed and fished through her purse, Mitchell told me that Clint tends to keep to himself but that Bo and Asa are a lot of fun.

I can’t believe I’m hearing these things. I know people who have sat around with Tina, Cord, Nicki, Asa, and Clint. I’m getting closer, I can feel it.

This evening I was working as a Counter Elf at the Magic Tree when I saw a woman unzip her son’s fly, release his penis, and instruct him to pee into a bank of artificial snow. He was a young child, four or five years old, and he did it, he peed. Urine dripped from the branches of artificial trees and puddled on the floor.

Tonight a man proposed to his girlfriend in one of the Santa houses. When Santa asked the man what he wanted for Christmas, he pulled a ring out of his pocket and said he wanted this woman to be his wife. Santa congratulated them both and the Photo Elf got choked up and started crying.

A spotted child visited Santa, climbed up on his lap, and expressed a wish to recover from chicken pox. Santa leapt up.

I’ve met elves from all walks of life. Most of them are show business people, actors and dancers, but a surprising number of them held real jobs at advertising agencies and brokerage firms before the recession hit. Bless their hearts, these people never imagined there was a velvet costume waiting in their future. They’re the really bitter elves. Many of the elves are young, high school and college students. They’re young and cute and one of the job perks is that I get to see them in their underpants. The changing rooms are located in the employee bathrooms behind SantaLand. The men’s bathroom is small and the toilets often flood, so we are forced to stand on an island of newspapers in order to keep our socks dry. The Santas have a nice dressing room across the hall, but you don’t want to see a Santa undress. Quite a few elves have taken to changing clothes in the hallway, beside their lockers. These elves tend to wear bathing suits underneath their costumes — jams, I believe they are called. I don’t like jams.

The overall cutest elf is a fellow from Queens named Snowball. Snowball tends to ham it up with the children, sometimes literally tumbling down the path to Santa’s house. I tend to frown on that sort of behavior but Snowball is hands down adorable — you want to put him in your pocket. Yesterday we worked together as Santa Elves and I became excited when he started saying things like, “I’d follow you to Santa’s house any day, Crumpet.”

It made me dizzy, this flirtation.

By mid-afternoon I was running into walls. At the end of our shift we were in the bathroom, changing clothes, when suddenly we were surrounded by three Santas and five other elves — all of them were guys that Snowball had been flirting with.

Snowball just leads elves on, elves and Santas. He is playing a dangerous game.

This afternoon I was stuck being Photo Elf with Santa Santa. I don’t know his real name; no one does.
During most days, there is a slow period when you sit around the house and talk to your Santa. Most of them are nice guys and we sit around and laugh, but Santa Santa takes himself a bit too seriously. I asked him where he lives, Brooklyn or Manhattan, and he said, “Why, I live at the North Pole with Mrs. Claus!” I asked what he does the rest of the year and he said, “I make toys for all of the children.”

I said, “Yes, but what do you do for money?”

“Santa doesn't need money,” he said.

Santa Santa sits and waves and jingles his bell sash when no one is there. He actually recited “The Night Before Christmas,” and it was just the two of us in the house, no children. Just us. What do you do with a nut like that?

He says, “Oh, Little Elf, Little Elf, straighten up those mantel toys for Santa.” I reminded him that I have a name, Crumpet, and then I straightened up the stuffed animals.

“Oh, Little Elf, Little Elf, bring Santa a throat lozenge.” So I brought him a lozenge.

Santa Santa has an elaborate little act for the children. He'll talk to them and give a hearty chuckle and ring his bells and then he asks them to name their favorite Christmas carol. Most of them say “Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer.” Santa Santa then asks if they will sing it for him. The children are shy and don't want to sing out loud, so Santa Santa says, “Oh, Little Elf, Little Elf! Help young Brenda to sing that favorite carol of hers.” Then I have to stand there and sing “Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” which I hate. Half the time young Brenda's parents are my age and that certainly doesn't help matters much.

This afternoon I worked as an Exit Elf, telling people in a loud voice, “THIS WAY OUT OF SANTALAND.” A woman was standing at one of the cash registers paying for her idea of a picture, while her son lay beneath her kicking and heaving, having a tantrum.

The woman said, “Riley, if you don't start behaving yourself, Santa's not going to bring you any of those toys you asked for.”

The child said, “He is too going to bring me toys, liar, he already told me.”

The woman grabbed my arm and said, “You there, Elf, tell Riley here that if he doesn't start behaving immediately, then Santa's going to change his mind and bring him coal for Christmas.”

I said that Santa no longer traffics in coal. Instead, if you're bad he comes to your house and steals things. I told Riley that if he didn't behave himself, Santa was going to take away his TV and all his electrical appliances and leave him in the dark. “All your appliances, including the refrigerator. Your food is going to spoil and smell bad. It's going to be so cold and dark where you are. Man, Riley, are you ever going to suffer. You're going to wish you never heard the name Santa.”

The woman got a worried look on her face and said, “All right, that's enough.”

I said, “He's going to take your car and your furniture and all the towels and blankets and leave you with nothing.”

The mother said, “No, that's enough, really.”

I spend all day lying to people, saying, “You look so pretty,” and, “Santa can't wait to visit with you. You're all he talks about. It's just not Christmas without you. You're Santa's favorite person in the entire tri-state area.” Sometimes I lay it on real thick: “Aren't you the Princess of Rongovia? Santa said a beautiful Princess was coming here to visit him. He said she would be wearing a red dress and that she was very pretty, but not stuck up or two-faced. That's you, isn't it?” I lay it on and the parents mouth the words “Thank you” and “Good job.”

To one child I said, “You're a model, aren't you?” The girl was maybe six years old and said, “Yes, I model, but I also act. I just got a second callback for a Fisher-Price commercial.” The girl's mother said, “You may recognize Katelyn from the 'My First Sony' campaign. She's on the box.” I said yes, of course.

All I do is lie, and that has made me immune to compliments.

Lately I am feeling trollish and have changed my elf name from Crumpet to Blisters. Blisters — I think it's cute.

Today a child told Santa Ken that he wanted his dead father back and a complete set of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Everyone wants those Turtles.

Last year a woman decided she wanted a picture of her cat sitting on Santa's lap, so she smuggled it into Macy's in a duffel bag. The cat sat on Santa's lap for five seconds before it shot out the door, and it took six elves forty-five minutes before they found it in the kitchen of the employee cafeteria.

A child came to Santa this morning and his mother said, “All right, Jason. Tell Santa what you want. Tell him what you want.”

Jason said, “I . . . want . . . Prokton and . . . Gamble to . . . stop animal testing.”

The mother said, “Procter, Jason, that's Procter and Gamble. And what do they do to animals? Do they
torture animals, Jason? Is that what they do?"

Jason said, Yes, they torture. He was probably six years old.
This week my least favorite elf is a guy from Florida whom I call “The Walrus.” The Walrus has a handlebar mustache, no chin, and a neck the size of my waist. In the dressing room he confesses to being “a bit of a ladies' man.”

The Walrus acts as though SantaLand were a singles bar. It is embarrassing to work with him. We'll be together at the Magic Window, where he pulls women aside, places his arm around their shoulders, and says, “I know you're not going to ask Santa for good looks. You've already got those, pretty lady. Yes, indeed, you've got those in spades.”

In his mind the women are charmed, dizzy with his attention.

I pull him aside and say, “That was a mother you just did that to, a married woman with three children.”

He says, “I didn't see any ring.” Then he turns to the next available woman and whistles, “Santa's married but I'm not. Hey, pretty lady, I've got plenty of room on my knee.”

I Photo Elfed all day for a variety of Santas and it struck me that many of the parents don't allow their children to speak at all. A child sits upon Santa's lap and the parents say, “All right now, Amber, tell Santa what you want. Tell him you want a Baby Alive and My Pretty Ballerina and that winter coat you saw in the catalog.”

The parents name the gifts they have already bought. They don't want to hear the word “pony,” or “television set,” so they talk through the entire visit, placing words in the child's mouth. When the child hops off the lap, the parents address their children, each and every time, with, “What do you say to Santa?”

The child says, “Thank you, Santa.”

It is sad because you would like to believe that everyone is unique and then they disappoint you every time by being exactly the same, asking for the exact same lines as though they have been handed a script.

All of the adults ask for a Gold Card or a BMW and they rock with laughter, thinking they are the first person brazen enough to request such pleasures.

Santa says, “I'll see what I can do.”

Couples over the age of fifty all say, “I don't want to sit on your lap, Santa, I'm afraid I might break it!”

How do you break a lap? How did so many people get the idea to say the exact same thing?

I went to a store on the Upper West Side. This store is like a Museum of Natural History where everything is for sale: every taxidermic or skeletal animal that roams the earth is represented in this shop and, because of that, it is popular. I went with my brother last weekend. Near the cash register was a bowl of glass eyes and a sign reading “DO NOT HOLD THESE GLASS EYES UP AGAINST YOUR OWN EYES: THE ROUGH STEM CAN CAUSE INJURY.”

I talked to the fellow behind the counter and he said, “It's the same thing every time. First they hold up the eyes and then they go for the horns. I'm sick of it.”

It disturbed me that, until I saw the sign, my first impulse was to hold those eyes up to my own. I thought it might be a laugh riot.

All of us take pride and pleasure in the fact that we are unique, but I'm afraid that when all is said and done the police are right: it all comes down to fingerprints.

There was a big “Sesame Street Live” extravaganza over at Madison Square Garden, so thousands of people decided to make a day of it and go straight from Sesame Street to Santa. We were packed today, absolutely packed, and everyone was cranky. Once the line gets long we break it up into four different lines because anyone in their right mind would leave if they knew it would take over two hours to see Santa. Two hours — you could see a movie in two hours. Standing in a two-hour line makes people worry that they’re not living in a democratic nation. People stand in line for two hours and they go over the edge. I was sent into the hallway to direct the second phase of the line. The hallway was packed with people, and all of them seemed to stop me with a question: which way to the down escalator, which way to the elevator, the Patio Restaurant, gift wrap, the women's rest room, Trim-A-Tree. There was a line for Santa and a line for the women's bathroom, and one woman, after asking me a dozen questions already, asked, “Which is the line for the women's bathroom?” I shouted that I thought it was the line with all the women in it.

She said, “I'm going to have you fired.”
I had two people say that to me today, “I'm going to have you fired.” Go ahead, be my guest. I'm wearing a green velvet costume; it doesn't get any worse than this. Who do these people think they are?

“I'm going to have you fired!” and I wanted to lean over and say, “I'm going to have you killed.”

In the Maze, on the way to Santa's house, you pass spectacles — train sets, dancing bears, the candy-cane forest, and the penguins. The penguins are set in their own icy wonderland. They were built years ago and they frolic mechanically. They stand outside their igloo and sled and skate and fry fish in a pan. For some reason people feel compelled to throw coins into the penguin display. I can't figure it out for the life of me — they don't throw money at the tree of gifts or the mechanical elves, or the mailbox of letters, but they empty their pockets for the penguins. I asked what happens to that money, and a manager told me that it's collected for charity, but I don't think so. Elves take the quarters for the pay phone, housekeeping takes the dimes, and I've seen visitors, those that aren't throwing money, I've seen them scooping it up as fast as they can.

I was working the Exit today. I'm supposed to say, “This way out of SantaLand,” but I can't bring myself to say it as it seems like I'm rushing people. They wait an hour to see Santa, they're hit up for photo money, and then someone's hustling them out. I say, “This way out of SantaLand if you've decided maybe it's time for you to go home.”

“You can exit this way if you feel like it.”

We're also supposed to encourage people to wait outside while the parent with money is paying for a picture. “If you're waiting for someone to purchase a photo, wait outside the double doors.”

I say, “If you're waiting for someone to purchase a picture, you might want to wait outside the double doors where it is pleasant and the light is more flattering.”

I had a group of kids waiting this afternoon, waiting for their mom to pay for pictures, and this kid reached into his pocket and threw a nickel at me. He was maybe twelve years old, jaded in regard to Santa, and he threw the nickel and it hit my chest and fell to the floor. I picked it up, cleared my throat, and handed it back to him. He threw it again. Like I was a penguin. So I handed it back and he threw it higher, hitting me in the neck. I picked up the nickel and turned to another child and said, “Here, you dropped this.” He examined the coin, put it in his pocket, and left.

Yesterday was my day off, and the afflicted came to visit Santa. I Photo Elfed for Santa Ira this afternoon, and he told me all about it. These were severely handicapped children who arrived on stretchers and in wheelchairs. Santa couldn't put them on his lap, and often he could not understand them when they voiced their requests. Still, though, he made it a point to grab each child's hand and ask what they wanted for Christmas. He did this until he came to a child who had no hands. This made him self-conscious, so he started placing a hand on the child's knee until he came to a child with no legs. After that he decided to simply nod his head and chuckle.

I got stuck with Santa Santa again this afternoon and had to sing and fetch for three hours. Late in the afternoon, a child said she didn't know what her favorite Christmas carol was. Santa said, “‘Rudolph'? ‘Jingle Bells'? 'White Christmas'? 'Here Comes Santa Claus'? 'Away in the Manger'? 'Silent Night'? ”

The girl agreed to “Away in the Manger,” but didn't want to sing it because she didn't know the words. Santa Santa said, “Oh, Little Elf, Little Elf, come sing 'Away in the Manger' for us.”

It didn't seem fair that I should have to solo, so I told him I didn't know the words.

Santa Santa said, “Of course you know the words. Come now, sing!”

So I sang it the way Billie Holliday might have sung it if she'd put out a Christmas album. “Away in the manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord, Jesus, lay down his sweet head.”

Santa Santa did not allow me to finish.
This afternoon we set a record by scooting fourteen hundred people through SantaLand in the course of an hour. Most of them were school groups in clots of thirty or more. My Santa would address them, saying, “All right, I'm going to count to three, and on three I want you all to yell what you want and I need you to say it as loud as you can.”

Then he would count to three and the noise was magnificent. Santa would cover his ears and say, “Okay, then,— one by one want you to tell me what you're planning to leave Santa on Christmas Eve.”

He would go around the room and children would name different sorts of cookies, and he would say, “What about sandwiches: What if Santa should want something more substantial than a cookie?”

Santa's thrust this afternoon was the boredom of his nine-year relationship. He would wave the children good-bye and then turn to me, saying, “I want an affair, Goddamn it — just a little one, just something to get me through the next four or five years.”

Some of these children, they get nervous just before going in to visit Santa. They pace and wring their hands and stare at the floor. They act like they're going in for a job interview. I say, “Don't worry, Santa's not going to judge you. He's very relaxed about that sort of thing. He used to be judgmental but people gave him a hard time about it so he stopped. Trust me, you have nothing to worry about.”

I was Photo Elf tonight for the oldest Santa. Usually their names are written on the water cups they keep hidden away on the toy shelf. Every now and then a Santa will call out for water and an elf will hold the cup while his master drinks through a straw. I looked on the cup and saw no name. We were busy tonight and I had no time for an introduction. This was an outstanding Santa, wild but warm. The moment a family leaves, this Santa, sensing another group huddled upon his doorstep, will begin to sing.

He sings, “A pretty girl . . . is like a melody.”

The parents and children enter the room, and if there is a girl in the party, Santa will take a look at her, hold his gloved hands to his chest, and fake a massive heart attack — falling back against the cushion and moaning with a combination of pleasure and pain. Then he slowly comes out of it and says, “Elf, Elf . . . are you there?”

“Yes, Santa, I'm here.”

“Elf, I just had a dream that I was standing before the most beautiful girl in the world. She was right here, in my house.”

Then I say, “It wasn't a dream, Santa. Open your eyes, my friend. She's standing before you.”

Santa rubs his eyes and shakes his head as if he were a parish priest, visited by Christ. “Oh, heavenly day,” he says, addressing the child. “You are the most beautiful girl I have seen in six hundred and seventeen years.”

Then he scoops her into his lap and flatters every aspect of her character. The child is delirious. Santa gestures toward the girl's mother, asking, "Is that your sister I see standing there in the corner

“No, that's my mother.”

Santa calls the woman over close and asks if she has been good mother. “Do you tell your daughter that you love her? I you tell her every day?”

The mothers always blush and say, “I try, Santa.”

Santa asks the child to give her mother a kiss. Then he addresses the father, again requesting that he tell the child how much he loves her.

Santa ends the visit, saying, "Remember that the most important thing is to try and love other people as much as they love you.

The parents choke up and often cry. They grab Santa's hand and, on the way out, my hand. They say it was worth the wait. The most severe cases open their wallets and hand Santa a few bucks. We're not supposed to accept tips, but most Santas take the money and wink, tucking it into their boot. This Santa looked at money as if it were a filthy Kleenex. He closed his eyes and prepared for the next family.

With boys, this Santa plays on their brains: each one is smartest boy in the world.

The great thing about this Santa is that he never even asks what the children want. Most times he involves the parents to the point where they surrender their urge for documentation. They lay down their video recorders and gather round for the festival of love.

I was the Pointer Elf again this afternoon, one of my favorite jobs. The Pointer stands inside the Magic
Tree and appoints available Santa Elves to lead parties of visitors to the houses. First-time visitors are enthusiastic, eager that they are moments away from Santa. Some of the others, having been here before, have decided to leave nothing to chance.

Out of all the Santas, two are black and both are so light-skinned that, with the beard and makeup, you would be hard-pressed to determine their race.

Last week, a black woman became upset when, having requested a “Santa of color,” she was sent to Jerome.

After she was led to the house, the woman demanded to speak with a manager.

“He's not black,” the woman complained.

Bridget assured this woman that Jerome was indeed black.

The woman said, “Well, he isn't black enough.”

Jerome is a difficult Santa, moody and unpredictable. He spends a lot of time staring off into space and tallying up his paycheck for the hours he has worked so far. When a manager ducks in, encouraging him to speed things up, Jerome says, “Listen up, I'm playing a role here. Do you understand? A dramatic role that takes a great deal of preparation, so don’t hassle me about Time.”

Jerome seems to have his own bizarre agenda. When the children arrive, he looks down at his boots and lectures them, suggesting a career in entomology.

“Entomology, do you know what that is?”

He tells them that the defensive spray of the stink bug may contain medicinal powers that can one day cure mankind of communicable diseases.

“Do you know about holistic medicine?” he asks.

The Photo Elf takes a picture of yawning children.

The other black Santa works during weeknights and I have never met him but hear he is a real entertainer, popular with Photo Elves and children.

The last time I was the Pointer Elf, a woman approached me and whispered, “We would like a traditional Santa. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about.”

I sent her to Jerome.

Yesterday Snowball was the Pointer and a woman pulled him aside, saying, “Last year we had a chocolate Santa. Make sure doesn't happen again.”

I saw it all today. I was Pointer Elf for all of five minutes before a man whispered, “Make sure we get a white one this year. Last year we were stuck with a black.”

A woman touched my arm and mouthed, “White — white like us.”

I address a Santa Elf, the first in line, and hand these people over. Who knows where they will wind up? The children are antsy, excited — they want to see Santa. The children are sweet. The parents are manipulative and should be directed toward the A&S Plaza, two blocks away. A&S has only two Santas working at the same time — a white Santa and a black Santa, and it's very clear-cut: whites in one line and blacks in another.

I've had requests from both sides. White Santa, black Santa, a Pointer Elf is instructed to shrug his shoulders and feign ignorance, saying, “There's only one Santa.”

Today I experienced my cash register nightmare. The actual financial transactions weren't so bad — I've gotten the hang of that. The trouble are the voids. A customer will offer to pay in cash and then, after I have arranged it, they examine their wallets and say, “You know what, I think I'll put that on my card instead.”

This involves voids and signatures from the management.

I take care of the paperwork, accept their photo form, and staple it to the receipt. Then it is my job to say, “The pictures taken today will be mailed January twelfth.”

The best part of the job is watching their faces fall. These pictures are sent to a lab to be processed; it takes time, all these pictures so late in the season. If they wanted their pictures to arrive before Christmas, they should have come during the first week we were open. Lots of people want their money back after learning the pictures will arrive after Christmas, in January, when Christmas is forgotten. Void.

We were very crowded today and I got a kick out of completing the transaction, handing the customer a receipt, and saying, “Your photos will be mailed on August tenth.”

August is much funnier than January. I just love to see that look on someone's face, the mouth a perfect O.

This was my last day of work. We had been told that Christmas Eve is a slow day, but this was the day a week of training was meant to prepare us for. It was a day of nonstop action, a day when the managers spent a great deal of time with their walkie-talkies.

I witnessed a fistfight between two mothers and watched while a woman experienced a severe, crowd-related anxiety attack: falling to the floor and groping for breath, her arms moving as though she were fighting
off bats. A Long Island father called Santa a faggot because he couldn't take the time to recite “The Night Before Christmas” to his child. Parents in long lines left disposable diapers at the door to Santa's house. It was the rowdiest crowd I have ever seen, and we were short on elves, many of whom simply did not show up or called in sick. As a result we had our lunch hours cut in half and had to go without our afternoon breaks. Many elves complained bitterly, but the rest of us found ourselves in the moment we had all been waiting for. It was us against them. It was time to be a trouper, and I surrendered completely. My Santa and I had them on the lap, off the lap in forty-five seconds flat. We were an efficient machine surrounded by chaos. Quitting time came and went for the both of us and we paid it no mind. My plane was due to leave at eight o'clock, and I stayed until the last moment, figuring the time it would take to get to the airport. It was with reservation that I reported to the manager, telling her I had to leave. She was at a cash register, screaming at a customer. She was, in fact, calling this customer a bitch. I touched her arm and said, “I have to go now.” She laid her hand on my shoulder, squeezed it gently, and continued her conversation, saying, “Don't tell the store president I called you a bitch. Tell him I called you a fucking bitch, because that's exactly what you are. Now get out of my sight before I do something we both regret.”
Table of Contents

Santa Land Diaries  
***
***
***