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**Santa For A Day**

**By Michael LaRocca**

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The year was 1981. I was eighteen years old. Much too young to be Santa Claus, right? Especially with my short skinny self. Right? Wrong!

It's all my fault. I can blame nobody else. I was the one who opened my big mouth, and I paid the price.

I was working at a restaurant called The Village Inn, down in Tampa Florida. There are no white Christmases in Tampa. Nope, it drops to about 60 in December. (16 to those of you measuring in centigrade.) The coldest month of the year. Truly, not the best weather for wearing a padded suit, a fake mustache and beard, etc.

Lemme describe our busboys, those fellows who clean up the tables after you finish eating. There were four of us.

First we had Stacy, an engineering student at the university up the road. Very tall, very thin, very black. He was never a candidate for the position of Santa Claus and he didn't want to be one. This is the same guy who'd work for six hours, get so exhausted he could barely move, then pop off to the restroom for a moment and come back running and dancing in the aisles. He swore he wasn't taking speed, but nobody believed him.

Next we had Ricky, a high school student. He was short. Shorter than me, and not many could say that back in those days. If we were auditioning for elves, he'd have won the job. But Santa? No way. His ambition was to form the world's first all-white funk band. He introduced me to the music of a then-obscure fellow named Prince. Last I heard, Ricky was breeding snakes.

Then we had Michael LaRocca. That would be me. Not a bad fellow, really. Working to pay his way through college. Thick legs (muscle, thank you) and broad shoulders. But it was never any big secret that he didn't especially like kids. To be blunt about it, he still doesn't. Apologies to any parents reading this, but Michael was never meant to be one. It's just that simple.

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Finally, we had Mike. Tall, thin, angular, thin, blonde, thin, and sunburnt. Oh, and did I mention thin? I don't know if/where he was a student, but his face looked the youngest of us all. A real surf dude. He even called people "dude." In fact, when this unlikely candidate got the job of being Santa Claus, he would say "What do you want for Christmas, dude?" Even to the girls.

The dining room manager was always a consummate professional. Quite strict on the busboys. A drill sergeant of a woman, in fact. Maybe she was a prison warden in another life. Her name was Jo LaRocca. That's right, my mom.

On Christmas Eve, Mike put on the Santa garb and sat at his post. The rest of us were laughing before he even got there. He looked absurd. Sunburnt Santa. The beard was falling off his angular red face, and any fool could compare his padded upper body to his skinny legs and see that this was NOT Santa

Claus. He was a joke, and we enjoyed it thoroughly.

Day one of two, Mike was hanging out with the kids. They weren't buying it. It was obvious. I like Mike a lot, don't get me wrong. We all did. Bussing tables or BSing in the breakroom, he was hilarious. Given the stresses of the job, we needed hilarious. But he was the worst Santa ever. Kids were yelling at him, peeing on him, calling him a fake. It was a disaster.

Should folks laugh at their co-workers? Of course not. But could we stop ourselves? Of course not! And as we all laughed at him, mocked him, and just plain acted real stupid, I made the biggest mistake of all. I dared to utter the words, "I could do better than that." Mom heard me say them. This was very bad.

Thus, day two of two, yours truly got to play Santa Claus. An eighteen-year-old Santa Claus. An underage alcoholic with a bad attitude. Mom was a strict boss, in case I forgot to mention that. She told it like it was. Be Santa, or be unemployed. Grr! So, on Christmas Day, which I'm fairly sure was a Sunday (our busiest day of the week), I was Santa Claus.

I strapped on the various and sundry accouterments required to be Santa Claus and checked myself out in the mirror. Not bad, to be honest. But I was in no mood to be honest. Kids? Noooo!!!

It didn't take me long to work out the deal. I'd seen most of these kids every Sunday for about a year, but even if I hadn't, I knew what was what. The girls were all angelic, and the boys were all evil. Truly, mean rotten nasty evil. It was in their eyes. Demonic eyes. You know how some photos show people with red eyes? In the case of these little dudes, it wasn't bad photography. It's just how they were.

With the girls, it was easy. "Yes yes, you've been a good girl this year. What do you want Santa to bring you?" Then I'd hear the list and say encouraging things and send them on their merry way. Quite simple.

The boys were different.

Let me backtrack a bit. I am Scrooge. Sorry if that offends you, but I am. Back in my younger days, I

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was even worse. For me, Christmas isn't Christmas unless I can watch *How The Grinch Stole Christmas*. I have yet to forgive him for wimping out at the end, but never mind.

Okay, here comes a little boy sitting on my lap. Or to be more specific, jumping on it. Pouncing, leaping, going for broke. Little fat bastard trying to crush my family jewels. Is there a bull's-eye on them?! He's the Antichrist. I still have nightmares about that little... dude.

"Ho ho ho! Merry Christmas! And what do you want for Christmas, young man?" I boomed in my best impression of a baritone. It wasn't much, but it dang sure beat Mike's wimpy little tenor. But it didn't matter. I could've been God's gift to Christmas and this little... dude would have been unimpressed.

"You're not Santa! You suck!"

I've heard stories about Santa colleges, where one can go learn what to say and how to react to all the various and sundry things that naughty little boys (always boys) say. But I've never been to one. No, dear sweet Mom just threw me to the wolves and probably laughed behind her hand. In fact, I saw her hand covering her mouth more than once. I was winging it here. So, I simply ignored his question and

made something up.

"I know you've heard that I have two lists, right? The list of nice children and the list of naughty children."

"Yeah," he muttered, thoroughly unconvinced.

"But I also have a third list, one you haven't heard about. It's the borderline list. That's right, some children are right there on the border. Are they naughty or are they nice? I'm not sure where to put them. And to tell you the truth, little man, you are on that list."

Stunned silence. On his part, because he'd never heard that before. On my part, because I wasn't quite sure what I was going to make up next.

(Note to my fellow authors — If you're going to lie, do it big.)

"So you can tell me what you want me to bring you, but that doesn't mean I'll bring it. Because I don't know if you're naughty or nice, see? You're borderline. Those are the hardest ones for poor ole Santa to figure out."

(By now his mother was beaming at me. I was happy. But I had to ignore that and try to keep piling it on. That's a lot to ask of a mere eighteen-year-old BS artist.)

"I'll tell you what I think," I added. "If you want to know."

"Yeah."

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That was all he said. "Yeah." But to whip out a cliché, his eyes spoke volumes. If this were a fishing story, I'd say he'd bitten into that bait and found a hook stuck in his mouth. Amazing!

"Well, as I said, you're borderline. But if you'll be really good, and I mean REALLY good, between now and Christmas, I'll put you on the good list. If you're bad, I'll put you on the naughty list. And you don't want that. You want to be on the good list. Don't you?"

A pause. As if the little brat wasn't sure! What is it with kids who won't suck up and take a bribe when they're offered one? Jeez! When I was a little brat — um, I mean kid — I NEVER refused a bribe.

"Yes, Santa Claus."

Reel this one in. Yes!

"That's what I thought, son." (Yes, I called the little brat son.) "Now tell Santa Claus what you want, and if you're really good between now and Christmas, I'll bring it to you. How's that?"

Of course it was fine, and of course the list of things the little brat wanted was enough to max out seven credit cards. A train set, a Motocross bicycle, a slingshot for torturing his little sister, a GI Joe with Kung Fu grip. I listened to him, patted his evil head, gave him some candy, and gratefully sent him on his way. Neither he nor his mother suspected that I wanted to stick his head in a toilet and hold it there until he died. Well, I don't think they did.

After that, I got a bit of break. Meaning, the little girls. They were sweet and shy and wanted little Barbie dolls. If it were up to me I'd nuke Mattel, but I realized that Santa isn't supposed to say that, so I promised them all Barbies and gave them candy and sent them on their merry way.

I still hear Mike laughing. I'm gonna give him a busted lip for Christmas. I know damn well he deliberately stunk as Santa just because he didn't want the job. Grr!

Every little boy was a brat. I am not joking. I whipped out that borderline story with every one of them. I was tempted to scream, "You are evil and you should die and I'll stuff your stocking with coals and switches and hope your parents beat you to death," but that wouldn't have been good for business. So I went into borderline story mode and drank up the parents' gratitude while never believing it'd change a thing. I know them boys were evil. They all looked like my little brother.

Finally, I got the intellectual. The skeptic. The little one who chose not to be an evil brat, but rather a smart brat. So smart that you just wanna knock him across the room. Especially for reminding me of myself. Don't do that!

Now you may remember that I never received a formal job description, but something in me suspected that "knock brat across the room" wasn't in it.

"I don't believe any of that Santa Claus stuff. You're just some guy in a suit and fake beard."

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This was a few hours into the shift, so I was getting cocky. "And why do you say that, young man?"

"Because there's no way you could fly all the way around the world so fast. Not in one night. That's just not possible."

Smart—aleck little... dude. For a moment I thought he had me. But apparently I can "think on my feet" if pressed into a corner, because here's my reply:

"We're in Florida now, right?"

"Yeah."

"And what time is it here?"

"About noon."

"Okay, let's say it's noon. Do you know what time it is in Alabama?"

"No."

"It's still eleven in the morning. And what time is it in Texas?"

"I dunno."

(I got your butt!)

"Ten in the morning. And in California, it's only nine in the morning. That's the thing, see? Time zones.

I start where it's earliest and get everybody in that time zone in one hour, then pop over to the next time zone and have an hour to get all them, and so on. And some time zones out over the ocean don't even have people in them."

It took him a moment to figure that all out, because I wasn't expressing myself as eloquently as I could have. I blame it on exhaustion. But finally he replied, "Really?"

I nodded sagely.

My little skeptic seemed to agree. And that was the point, right? Getting him off my lap so I could move on to a little girl who didn't make me work so hard. Conning the little people into buying the myth for one more year.

For the record, I was nine and little brother was eight when we sneaked out of bed one night (his idea) and found a bunch of wrapped presents on top of a high closet shelf. When we received those same presents for Christmas, marked "From Santa," little brother drilled Mom like the cop he would grow up to be and she confessed. But even so, I never deliberately disillusioned anyone. Santa Claus is a fun

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guy to believe in.

Later came a little skeptic who needed both the time zone story and the borderline list story for me to win him over to the cause. In a brilliant flash of insight, I added, "Do you want Santa to tell you another secret?"

His eyes widened and he leaned in close. "Uh huh."

"You can't tell anybody."

"Okay."

We were whispering now. I really didn't want his parents to hear this part.

"Do you like milk and cookies?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Me too. But I go to a lot of houses on Christmas Eve night, and everybody leaves me milk and cookies. Do you think you could eat and drink that much milk and cookies?"

"No."

"Okay, so here's what you do." I leaned my mouth right up to his ear, my beard brushing his face, and whispered to my little conspirator, "When your parents go to bed, drink the milk and eat the cookies, and leave Santa a beer."

He giggled, then turned to face me. He nodded. "Okay, Santa."

"Good boy."

The boy's mother, who had been talking to my mother, looked up as if sensing that the visit was over.

So I said, louder and more Santa-like, "Be a good boy and do your homework and clean up your room and do what your parents tell you, okay?"

"Okay, Santa. Thank you, Santa." And the little imp winked.

But you know, I'm pretty sure that when Santa came sliding down my little friend's chimney, he'd definitely be in the mood for a beer. I know that's what I always left out for Santa when I was young.

After that the job got easier. Whip out the time zone story, whip out the borderline list story, and all the little boys fell into line. I lined up another beer or two for Santa -- I only tried that stunt with my favorite little boys.

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As I converted the skeptics or at least gave them pause, mothers gazed upon this all-too-young Santa with gratitude. I think I even made Mom proud. But that's something I learned about Mom long ago. She could get proud over the silliest things.

The day finally ended, and I had to reluctantly admit that being Santa was a whole lot easier than bussing tables. To myself, of course, never to anyone else. And not a single kid peed on me, either. Mike tried real hard to mock me, but his jealousy ruined the effect.

The following year, all four of us busboys were still working there, but they found someone else to be Santa Claus. A waitress's husband who was much older and needed neither padding nor fake beard to assume the role. Nobody complained about him, either. Certainly we didn't.

Twenty years later, I'm still not complaining. And in those twenty years, I have never been Santa Claus again. Nor do I want the job.

Michael is an American living in Hong Kong. He has been working as a full-time author for over two years and as an editor for over a year. He has 4 novels scheduled for publication. He's proud of the fact that he rarely writes in the same genre twice. One of his novels is an EPPIE 2002 in the Thriller category. His website is at [http://free\\_reads.tripod.com](http://free_reads.tripod.com).

### **10 Reasons Santa's Broke This Year**

#### **By Darlene Arechederra**

##### **1. Santa Spends More Than He Makes**

Santa's paychecks are nothing to sneeze at, but he stays focused on his next raise. (Yes, of course Santa gets a raise each year!) He has no idea what it costs him to live the Santa life. He doesn't track his earnings nor his spending. Santa's got to provide for his reindeer, his horse and his North Pole home – just like the rest of us.

##### **2. Santa Has No Emergency Account**

Santa's transportation tends to break down right in the middle of major blizzards. Only last week, he had to whip out his credit card to pay for sleigh-towing. When Santa finally made it to the repair shop, he again had pay for the sleigh repair with credit. Just last year, he nearly had frost bite after his brand new sleigh had broken down.

##### **3. Santa Lives Paycheck to Paycheck**

Santa cashes his paycheck at the North Pole Bank, but most of the money gets spent before it makes its way to his checkbook. If it makes it there, most of the money is already owed to the credit card company. Santa has no other money set aside.

##### **4. Santa Doesn't Enjoy Balancing His Checkbook**

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Santa forgets to balance the checkbook. He spends money, but is never sure what he has available to spend. Santa doesn't know how to build in some fun to help him enjoy working in his checkbook.

### 5. Santa Spends His Raises and Bonuses

Santa got a nice raise back in January, following his Bonus check in December (bonus based on number of chimneys completed for the year). He thought he'd have plenty of money this year. But Santa likes nice, updated equipment at all times. He bought brand new gear for all his reindeer, even though last year's would have done the job.

### 6. Santa Eats Most of His Meals Out

Since Santa's job requires that he spend a large amount of time traveling, Santa tends to eat out way too much. He also has to feed his reindeer each time he sits down to eat. The tips alone are enough to keep him in the poorhouse.

### 7. Santa Lives on the Edge

Santa keeps himself so busy that he can't sit down and plan his life. He hasn't set up a plan to build

extra money into his checkbook, nor has he made a decision to actually save any of his money. Even setting up automatic deposit would be helpful. Another emergency could wipe him out. (No more Santa?)

### 8. Santa is Not Preparing for the Future

Santa, jolly fellow that he is, has no money set aside to work for him. He may end up working until his hair is much whiter (or gone). It's pretty much a given that Santa will need to replace that sleigh and maybe even some of the reindeer over the years. Because most of his money now goes to pay off credit cards, Santa just can't picture tucking away any money.

### 9. Santa Spends Too Much on R & R

Even Santa needs a little rest and relaxation after all that hard work. If he runs out of cash, he charges it. (No, I promised not to tell what Santa does for R & R. He does know who's been naughty or nice ...)

### 10. Santa Can't Stay Motivated

Santa gives himself a good lecture from time to time. He knows he should be doing better, but he just can't get any traction. Saving his money seems like an overwhelming obstacle. Santa hasn't discovered there are tricks out there to make saving money a fun thing, something he can look forward to doing.

Darlene Arechederra offers simple, unique strategies to help you become a saver. She believes the trick is to discover which ideas work best for you — because your money is not one-size-fits-all.

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10 Reasons Santa's Broke This Year

Santa Goes Low Carb!

What Santa Knows About Marketing

Mommy..Daddy..Is There A Santa Claus?

INTERNET OFFERS HOLIDAY FUN FOR FAMILY, CO-WORKERS

Gag Gifting.

RSS Announcer

Christmas Happy Package

Stretch Assistant Software

30-Day Low Carb Diet 'Ketosis Plan'



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