



# Undercover:

by Daniel Puckett

When I was 6 years old, I stopped believing in Santa Claus because he smelled like bourbon.

On Saturday, 21 years later, I was a Santa Claus at a local mall. I don't think I was a very good one, but if I caused any loss of faith, it wasn't for that reason.

Being a Santa is hard. It takes a willingness to believe in St. Nick and superhuman stamina, especially on weekends. Saturday afternoon is a busy time for a mall Santa — the rate of flow was about 60 children an hour.

The kids ran, or walked, or were dragged up to Santa's throne. Depending on the level of terror the whiskers inspired, it took a few seconds or more to get them on my lap. Then, invariably, the same few lines:

"What do you want for Christmas, Jennifer? Have you been a good girl? Well, Santa will see what he can do. Have a merry Christmas." Hand them a candy cane, send them on their way.

Sixty times an hour can get deadening. The delivery can become mechanical and the sentiments transparently false, especially to children, who are so good at detecting deception.

And then I'd see the hurt look in their eyes or, with the older ones, the first dawning of skepticism about St. Nick. That's when the mall Santa had to take a deep breath, remind himself why he was there, and try to rejuvenate his sincerity.

But it's very hard, after a few hours greeting a kid a minute.

That's why the Santas at my mall work only four hours at a time.

I worked only three, and was exhausted at the end of the shift.

It takes megawatts of energy to feed the Christmas sparkle in children's eyes.

Their reaction to the Santa suit has much to do with Santa's difficulty in keeping his enthusiasm high. The older ones are blasé; awed a little, maybe excited, but forthcoming about what they want and often exuberant in their affection.

But the younger ones, especially in the 3-to-5-year-old group, are a different story. All but a few were terrified. How they dealt with that depended on how permissive their parents were. The stern parents seemed to expect more fortitude from their children and those kids usually delivered: they may not have smiled, their lips may have trembled and they may have refused to talk to Santa, but they sat on his lap until Mommy said it was OK to leave — which they did at a run.

Many of the kids, though, were not so brave. They managed to get within about 2 feet of Santa and started howling.

Their bodies went rigid and they proved amazingly agile in keeping away from the old man in the white beard and red suit. No amount of persuasion, coercion or bribery managed to get those children on my lap. Once they started screaming, there was no turning back — a mes-

sage few parents were willing to accept.

Perhaps St. Nick was a jollier figure years ago, when men, especially old men, wore beards — children saw them every day, as a normal way for men to look.

Now, the only elderly bearded figures kids are faced with seem to be Old Man Time, God the Father and Santa Claus. Santa hardly inspires comfort in the company of two implacable figures of authority, closely associated with punishment and death. I don't blame those kids for being scared. I remember that I was.

The saddest thing about those kids was their parents' attitude. Clearly, the children were terrified; clearly, persuasion wasn't working.

But the parents would persist, shoving the kids onto my lap, promising them candy and toys. It was cruel and selfish. The parents wanted a picture of little Joey with Santa but the whole experience was so violent and hideous for Joey that he'll never remember it without a little flutter in his stomach.

Soon, you might be a parent too — for you, an ex-Santa has a piece of advice: if Joey won't get on Santa's lap, don't try to force him. Neither he nor Santa is likely to forgive you soon.

But the job wasn't all tears. Once the kids got to age 6 or so, they lost much of their fear and just enjoyed the experience.

Many of them viewed it as a trip to a catalog order outlet.

