

CHRISTOPHER WALKEN IS SANTA CLAUS

by

Darryl Mockridge

Mockridge



ESTUARY PUBLICATIONS

© 2019 [estuarypublications.com](http://estuarypublications.com)

Grass Valley, California

EstuaryPublications.com has the permission of *Bob Dylan Music Company (Special Rider Music)* to use the Bob Dylan songs mentioned in Christopher Walken IS Santa , in this highly speculative manner.

*Christopher Walken IS Santa Claus*

Mockridge

Author's Note:

I did Twitter for about 37 seconds before I was tired of it. In those 37 seconds I tweeted to a guy who had launched a noble, nationally advertised, goodwill effort to get people to each write their own novel. I tweeted: Do you honestly believe we need to encourage more people to write? That settled, I immediately started work on this.

## DECEMBER 26

It's late afternoon on the day after Christmas, inside a typical New Jersey tavern. Typical, you know, cracked, spalted green vinyl floors, stick chairs in bad repair, huge dark, ornate wooden back bar with a very large mirror, and, above the cash register, a clock with a cowgirl in a short fringe skirt and matching vest. She lifting a cold beer to her lips under a full, bright yellow moon.

The door to the tavern blows open and Santa—dressed in a long exaggerated fur coat—strolls in just as if he might own the place. (He doesn't.) Santa looks A LOT like Christopher Walken. He SOUNDS like Christopher Walken too. He takes off the fur and tosses it onto a coat rack near the door. Underneath he is wearing a very nicely fitted tuxedo. Proudly he poses, arms extended, prepared to welcome any admirers into his open, loving embrace.

The place is completely empty. Santa looks around, as if disappointed by the poor turn out, but he resigns himself. In an instant he's jovial again.

“Well, I'd say it's another successful little outing for the old man,” Santa declares proudly. He sits down at a table.

Tony, the barkeep and owner, leans almost lifelessly against the back counter. He is a slightly bowed, trim, if bedraggled man of 37. He looks like he's just gone 14 rounds in the ring with Life and taken a serious beating in every round. He has a towel in one hand. He looks at it, smirks and, apparently recognizing the metaphor, tosses the towel across the bar onto the floor.

It's a futile gesture; Life goes on, dragging Tony along with it. He's completely uninterested in Santa's antics, but has his professional obligations. "Things went well, did they?" he asks with no indication that an answer might either be required or mean anything at all to him.

Santa's humble but energetic.

"I think so. I think so." He pushes his chair away from the table. He puts his hands behind his head, leans back in the chair. "And, how are things with you, Anthony?"

"Fine."

"Well, you say *fine*, but I don't hear it. I don't really *feel it*, Anthony. It lacks the ring of authenticity. Did you have a nice Christmas? Santa bring you everything you wanted?"

"I stopped believing in Santa Claus a few years back."

Santa sighs.

“Well, that may be your mistake, Tone. You need to keep believin’. If you no don’t believe in the unbelievable, what else is there?” Santa looks around at the empty dive. “I’ll have my champagne now, if you don’t mind.”

Santa puts his exquisite split calf’s skin boots up on the table top.

On his way across the floor, carrying an ice bucket with a champagne bottle and one glass, Tony is mumbling to himself,

“If there was a Santa Claus, I’d ask him to burn this fuckin’ tavern to the ground.”

He arrives with the bottle and places it on the table. There’s a forced grin.

“Thank you, Tone; and bring another glass...you never know when an opportunity might pop up...”

Santa looks around at the empty tavern.

“There’s no one here but just you and me, Tone—as they say in the song. Now’s your chance.”

Tony glances at the door with little hope.

Santa removes one leg from the table and kicks a chair toward Tony. “Take a load off“; have a little of the bubbly with your oldest and most dedicated customer.”

“You’re serious?” Tony snorts.

“Would I kid about a thing of such monumental import? Have a seat.” He nudges the chair out a little further for the barkeep.

The barkeep hesitates.

Santa’s disappointed that his offer is not taken up immediately.

“Tone! I been comin’ in here on the day after Christmas since your grand-dad owned this joint. I’ve spent every December 26 here for as long as anyone can remember, and you won’t sit down and have a little drink with me? Don’t you care about me, Tone? Don’t you want to hear what I’m thinkin’? That don’t seem right.”

He eyes the barkeep accusatorily.

“I care about you, Anthony; I care about what *you’re* thinkin’, and...” Santa takes his other leg off the table and leans toward the barkeep. “I care about what you’re up to. I also understand what you’re *up against*.” He gestures toward the empty bar. “However,” he sighs, “do what you want.”

Santa pours a glass for himself and elevates it toward the light overhead to admire. He drinks with great luxury.

“I have to say this though, Tone. Have *you* ever *once* looked up and smiled at me, when I return to the nest? Have you ever taken the time to say, ‘Welcome back!’? Have you ever asked me what’s goin’ on in this noggin’ of mine?”



Santa sighs again, but this time more deeply.

“If I was the sensitive sort, I might reasonably be offended, Anthony. Come on, have a seat, let’s talk; I’ll tell you a little secret... somethin’ nobody else knows about me.”

“I...uh...”

“Come on. Let’s get to know each other a little.”

Santa pleads. “I know what *you* do for a living; it only seems fair that I should tell you what I do.”

“I know what you do,” says the barkeep bitterly.

Santa is clearly surprised by this.

“Really? Well, Tone, I gotta admit, I’m a bit surprised. So, what is it you think I do?”

Tony responds immediately, and with some disdain, “You’re a racketeer of some sort.”

Santa laughs hysterically. “Racketeer? Well, there’s a word you don’t hear every day. However, you’re pretty close. And I thought I had you fooled.” He raises a glass and drinks. “Here’s to perception.”

Tony goes back behind the bar as Santa raises the glass again, this time more slowly, more elegantly, and brings the glass to his greedily smacking lips.

[And, if this were a play, that would be the end of that scene.]

Much later, on that very same night, outside that tavern, in the green neon light Santa emerges to a very cold, somewhat dirty New Jersey city street. Parked directly in front is a long black limousine with the driver's side door open. The driver's seat is empty. Santa shivers in his fur coat, and spins in a circle on one heel, looking for his driver.

"Gregory?" he shouts, "Gregory!"

He goes around to the front of the limousine and scratches his head. He leans on the hood for a bit, then sighs and takes a few steps down the street to look around. There, in an alley, back against the brick wall, is the driver. Two thugs have him at knife point. Santa approaches without hesitation. He's somewhat peevish when he addresses the driver.

"Well, Gregory, what are you doing? This is no time for antics, I'm ready to go home."

The first thug looks at Santa and smirks.

"You out of your mind, old man? You want to get yourself cut?"

"What's your name?" asks Santa.

"D'fuck business is that of yours?"

"You'd be surprised. But, let's play a little game, shall we?"

"Does it look like we're playing games here?"

"No it certainly doesn't, I'll give you that. But, let's work this the other way around. You tell me where

you grew up, and *I'll tell you* your name. How would that be?"

"How bout this instead... YOU tell me where YOU live and after I slice up your boy here, YOU chauffer US over there and we take everything you own? How would THAT be?"

"Well, that's pretty clever, for a punk."

The thug abandons his grip on the driver, points the knife toward Santa.

"Who you callin' punk? I'll slice your white ass."

At this point the other thug quickly intervenes. He has a somewhat slow-witted Southern accent.

"Tyrico. May haps the man didn't mean anything by it. All we want is the car, Ty. Don't let's lose sight of that."

"Tyrico?" says Santa. "Thank you, young man. Now, Tyrico, where were you raised... what city?"

Waving the knife at Santa, Tyrico says, "What the fuck? Are you crazy, old man?"

The other intervenes again, "You was raised in Duluth, ain' so, Ty?"

"Oh really? I know Duluth pretty well," says Santa. "Whereabouts?"

Tyrico, leaning casually against Gregory's throat now, says, "In the bad part of a bad town, old man. You satisfied? Now may I *PLEASE* begin carving up this turkey?"

“Let me guess,” says Santa. “One hundred and thirty-fourth Street?”

Tyrico corrects him, “Langdon Ave, fucker.”

“There’s no need to quibble, Tyrico. 237 Langdon, apartment D; that’s pretty close to 134th. Old brick place...third floor walk-up, in the back... lived with your grandmother, Pearl. How’m I doin’?”

Tyrico switches his hands so that he’s leaning on Gregory’s chest. “How the fuck...?”

“Let me show you something, Mr. Bad Ass 134th Street,” says Santa, and he opens his coat to reveal the butt of an impressively large silver plated hand gun.

“That a G-40?”

“Yes, Tyrico, that’s a G-40. But what I wanted to show you was this...” Santa snaps his fingers and pulls a paper from out of his coat. He unfolds it and holds it up before Tyrico’s eyes.

“What is that?”

“That’s the algebra test that you failed which prevented you from graduating from high school. Do you remember the night before you took that test? Do you recall pleading, ‘All I want for Christmas is to pass this dumb-ass test so I can get out of this dumb-ass school?’ You could have had that, Tyrico, but you forgot to say the magic words.”

Clearly confused, Tyrico asks, “Magic words? What are you talkin’ about?”

*“Dear Santa.* That’s the standard form. Dear Santa, all I want for Christmas is to pass this dumb-ass test. You should have given that a try.”

Tyrico’s still leaning against the driver’s chest. He still wields the knife, but he’s distracted, his grip on things keeps shifting; he’s focused—riveted on Santa.

“I was s’posed to say, ‘Dear Santa, all I want for Christmas is to pass this dumb-ass test, so’s I can graduate from this dumb-ass school and get into the Mechanics Institute?’

“You’d be amazed at what a difference the proper format makes in this world.”

Tyrico is trapped somewhere between furious and pleading. “Man, how do you know all this stuff?

“Well, Tyrico, I know a lot of things. Let me show you something else, which I just happen to have with me.” Santa snaps his fingers and takes a leather folder from inside his fur coat.

“This is the diploma that you should have gotten, had you only passed that test.”

“Let me see that.” Tyrico snatches the diploma from Santa’s hand, and as he reads, Santa points out the particulars.

“See. Woodrow Wilson High School. That’s your name right there. Oh, and one other thing...” He withdraws an envelope from within his coat. “This is where the true miracle occurs, Tyrico. THIS is

your letter of acceptance at the Mechanics Institute. The letter you would have received if you had passed that algebra test.”

“Letter of acceptance... that I *didn't* get? The hell are you talkin' 'bout? I don't believe any of this.”

“Well, Tyrico, that may be the problem. You have to believe for things to work. Take another look.”

Santa snaps his fingers.

The young thug looks and the test now shows a passing grade of B-. Santa hands it to him.

“You might want to keep this.”

Tyrico holds the knife in one hand and the algebra test in the other. He doesn't know what's real any more, and he doesn't know what to do.

“Congratulations, Tyrico, Not only have you graduated, you've been accepted at the Mechanics Institute. All you gotta do is show up.”

Tyrico is staggered, but quickly recovers. “Shit, man, you couldn't a got me an A?”

“Your gratitude is touching. Now release Gregory and tell him you're sorry.”

“Sorry, man, all we wanted was your wheels.”

Santa and Gregory begin to walk away.

“Classes begin in February, Tyrico. Contact these people and let them know you're coming. They'll want to see that diploma. Come, Gregory, it's time to go home.”

“This ain’t real; there’s no way this is real.”

The other thug, Clarence, steps forward shyly.

“Uh... Santa. I mean, Santa, Sir...?”

“And what’s your name little boy?”

“Clarence, Santa. I’m Clarence... an’ I was brung up in Tuscaloosa, Alabama and I really like the fire engine you brung me, Santa... you know, one time, when I was little.”

“Well, there you go, Tyrico. Clarence here is an excellent example of the way things ought to be handled. Thank you, Clarence, I’m glad you liked it. And what about that football helmet you received the following year?”

“Oh, I liked that too, but it didn’t get so much use. My moms was convinced, helmet or no helmet, I was gonna split my head open like a melon if’n I played football. But, I still liked it, Santa. I liked the logo, I liked the color.”

“And when did you stop believing in Santa Claus, Clarence?”

“Bout eleven, I s’pose. But, I never really stopped. I mean, I HOPED in you, Santa. You know, I hoped in you.”

“Thank you, Clarence. Tyrico—how about you?”

Tyrico is too busy looking with astonishment at the test paper, the diploma, the letter of acceptance, to answer any questions.

Mockridge

“Well it was nice meeting you two gentlemen,” says Santa. “Let’s go Gregory. Classes start in February, Tyrico, don’t forget. I’d give them a call to set things up if I were you.”

Tyrico, completely bewildered, looks up from the papers and watches Santa and Gregory heading through heavily falling snow toward the limo.



## December 27, Early Afternoon

Santa is in the back of the long black limousine and they are passing through a nice neighborhood, an up-scale neighborhood. Outside the limo, the lawns, the trees, the nice houses with their Christmas decorations all sit in perfect, self-assured silence. The only activity is a little girl on her little pink bicycle wobbling toward the limo. The only sound is her humming a childish song to herself.

Santa rolls down the window to take in the cold fresh air and fixes upon a huge cut-out Santa waving from a badly painted plywood sleigh. There are two or three miserable plastic reindeer, which are far too small for the scene.

Santa leans forward and says to the driver, “Slow up, Gregory. Wait, wait. Stop right here. Now, tell me Gregory do I look like that? I mean, do I look anything at all like that?”

“No, sir. Most people seem to think you look like Christopher Walken.”

Santa reaches up and drops a make-up mirror down from the ceiling of the limo. He inspects his visage carefully, especially under the neck. He makes a few exaggerated faces.

“Well, I don’t see the resemblance.”

“They say you sound like him too.”

“Well, Gregory, there’s not much I can do about that, is there?”

“No sir.”

“Well, where do they get these ideas? I’m not some roly-poly bearded buffoon. I don’t dress up in red flannel and ermine like some kind of a lame-brained fashion moron...”

Santa sees the little girl on the bicycle rolling by wobbly. (As Elmer Fudd might say)

“Say, that’s a pretty spiffy bicycle you got there little girl,” shouts Santa. “Looks like Santa’s been pretty good to you.”

“Mommy gave it to me.”

Santa takes this statement like a punch to the face. Though the car is unmoving, Santa yells, “Stop. Gregory, stop. Stop! Stop this car!”

He then addressed the child in a soft, kindly voice, “What did you say?”

“Mommy gave it to me. For Christmas, Dummy!”

“Mommy gave it to you? Mommy gave you that bike?”

“Yes...”

Santa recovers, “Pretty nifty. You must have a pretty neat mommy to give you a swell bike like that. I’d like to speak to your mommy; which of these fine houses do you live in?”

“Number 36. But I’m not supposed to tell.”

Santa's talking to himself now. "I never recognize these places at street level." To the driver he says, "Gregory pull up in front of 36; it looks like I need to have a little talk with Mommy."

In front of 36—a huge white colonial with green shutters—Santa pops out of the car before Gregory can get around to open the door. Walking past a *large* plastic Santa, he goes up the brick steps and rings the bell. A woman, nicely dressed and coifed, answers the door.

"Are you Mommy?"

"Pardon me?" She looks beyond Santa and sees Gregory leaning with his arms crossed next to the back door of the car. She quickly starts to shut her front door, but Santa puts his very nicely shod foot in there to stop it.

"That little girl tells me that you're Mommy. Are you Mommy?"

"I'm sorry but..." She's now concerned about her daughter and cranes to get a glimpse of her. "AMY! Stay on the sidewalk, Honey."

Santa takes this opportunity to push his way past her and goes on into the hallway. The inside of the house is every bit as elegant, as predictable, as the outside. Santa looks around with a mix of appreciation and disgust.

"Nice place you got here, Mommy."

"I'm sorry, but, you can't..."

Santa gives her a knowing look.

“What can I do for you?” she asks placing her hands upon her hips.

“Well, I’ll tell you what you can do for me, Mommy. You can direct me to the other gifts *you* gave little Amy for Christmas.”

Santa starts nosing his way down the hall with Mommy following quickly upon his heels.

“Please. You can’t come into our home and... I mean you shouldn’t...”

Santa turns on her.

“You don’t want me in your home?”

“Well, I...”

“Is that it? Are you quite sure? I’m no longer welcome in your home?”

“Well...uh...”

“Did you tell that little girl that the bicycle she’s now riding out there—inappropriately dressed for this weather by the way—was a gift from Mommy?!”

“I didn’t think it would do any harm.”

“You didn’t think it would do any harm to fill your child’s head with nonsense? Or, you didn’t feel it would do any harm to feed her conflicting and confusing information? Where are the other gifts *Mommy* gave little Amy?”

Santa continues to make his way down the hallway, opening doors and looking into rooms.

“What... what are you looking for?”

“I’m looking for the Mommy tree. Where is the Mommy tree with all the little Mommy gifts sitting around it all photogenically? Where’s the tea set, the teddy bear, the Wubbykin Twins?”

Santa pushes open a door and discovers a room with a large Christmas tree surrounded in gifts. (We’ll just follow him inside.)

Santa goes directly to the tree. He turns accusatorily toward Mommy.

“All of these were from you, Mommy?”

“I...”

“Where are the tags, Evelyn?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Santa threatens to crush a tiny little porcelain tea set underfoot.

”Where are the tags?”

“Please stop.”

Santa steps on a stuffed animal, causing it to let out a startled bleat.

“Where are they?”

Mommy goes to a small leather waste basket under her desk and fishes out gift tags and brings them to Santa.

Santa reads them out loud as he shuffles through them.

“To Amy, from Mommy. To Amy, from Mommy. To Amy WITH LOVE, from MOMMY. From Mommy, from MOMMY, From Mommy. Where are the tags that say FROM Santa?” With his foot firmly on a Wubby, he insists, “Where are the *original* tags?”

Mommy is practically in tears, “I threw them away. I’m sorry... I...”

Santa keeps his foot in place, and as the Wubby squeals, she cowers.

“Well, Mommy, go dig them out of the garbage, Santa wants to see them.”

“I threw them out; they’re gone.”

Santa shakes his head in dismay.

“Now does that seem right to you? Does it seem right that you should switch the tags that say from Santa with tags that say from Mommy?”

“No,” she says hanging her head in shame, “No. It was wrong of me, I...”

“Well, it doesn’t seem right to me either,” says Santa. “And, it’s pissing me off just a bit. What am I going to do with you? You’ve been a very very naughty Mommy.

“I know... I’m really sorry...”

“Well, I have to be honest with you, Evelyn, I’m disappointed in you. You were such a good kid too. How are we going to remedy this situation?”

“I don’t know.”

Santa is seriously wounded. He's also weary from having to go through this.

"I don't know either. But I'm getting sick of it. I do all the work and you people take all the credit. How would that make you feel?"

She has no answer. She can't look Santa in the eye.

"Maybe you should think about how what you do affects others," suggests Santa.

He stomps from the house and, on his way to the car, goes out of his way to tromp across the muddy lawn and assault the large plastic Santa. After dislodging it from its support and throwing it to the ground, he kicks it several times, injuring his foot in the process. He limps to the car, gets in, grimacing. The driver closes his door behind him, then goes around and gets in behind the wheel.

Santa says, somewhat snappishly, "Get me out of here, Gregory."

**DECEMBER 27, Evening**

The door to the tavern blows open and Santa, dressed in a long exaggerated fur coat, limps in hunched over. He takes off the fur and tosses it lethargically in the direction of the coat rack. It misses. It falls to the floor as Santa watches with disgust. Underneath he is wearing the same, now crumpled, tuxedo. The place is still empty. It looks like it's been that way since he was last here.

Santa walks over gingerly to stand among the vacant tables and survey them.

“Well, ANTHONY, another day another dollar, as they say.”

Tony responds, uninterested. “That’s what they say, huh...?”

“I think so. It doesn’t really matter.”

Santa takes a seat at a table.

“How are things with you?”

“Oh, you know... it would be a waste of breath.”

“I know exactly what you mean. As Frank once said, ‘If you’re not cynical about the situation, you’re not very well informed about the situation.’ Nothin’ leads to disappointment quicker than the senselessness of it all, Tone,” Santa says wearily.

“I wouldn’t know. I stopped believing in happiness a few years back,” says the barkeep.



Santa sighs heavily. "I guess you're right." He mulls a bit. "Do you ever get tired, Anthony? I mean do you ever just get tired of it all?" Tony snorts, "Every goddamned minute of every goddamned day."

Tony puts his arms on the bar and leans forward so far that his nose almost touches the surface. This is a man surrendering to the unbearable trap he's built for himself. After a breather, he brings a bottle of beer and a glass to Santa's table.

"Thank you, Tone. Why don't you have one with me?"

Tony looks around at the empty place. He stares longingly at the door for awhile, with dwindling hope.

"Why not?" pleads Santa. "It can only do you good."

While Tony goes to get another beer, Santa draws little circles on the table top with his finger. Tony returns to the table. Santa kicks a chair in his direction. Tony sits and begins drinking without hesitation.

Three hours later there are empty beer bottles all over the table, one or two on the floor. The two men look like two men who have been drinking steadily for three hours.

They speak that way too.

“Tone! Look, Tone, I been comin’ in here since... when... since I no longer know.” Santa sighs deeply. “I guess that’s already been acknowledged. I’ve spend half my life in this joint. And you know, I have to be honest with you, Tone, I don’t like the place any more; I just don’t. Maybe you find that offensive. I mean I have to suppose you do.”

“Not at all. I don’t like the place myself.” Tony looks around and laughs snidely. “But what am I gonna do? I’m trapped. I’ll never get out of this fuckin’ place. They’ll carry me out in a box.”

They both ponder that statement.

Tony breaks the silence. “You know what I wish?”

“Write it down, Tone. Write it down.”

“Write it down?”

“That’s the way it works. Nobody’ll never remember it, less you write it down. I know I won’t.”

Tony stumbles to the bar and picks up a paper placemat and a pen, starts to write, violently discards the pen, finds another, tests it, returns to the table with Santa, sits and, tongue lolling, begins to write. The viciousness with which he inscribes the paper can be heard throughout that empty tavern. When he’s done, he holds up what he’s written for Santa to see.

“May I make a suggestion?” Santa asks.

“Make.”

“You should put ‘Dear Santa’ right up there” says Santa pointing. “That’ll make it official.”

Tony likes this idea a lot. He writes these words with added fury. “DEAR SANTA!” he says while scrawling them into the paper. “Here you go,” he tosses the paper onto the table, in amongst the empty bottles.

“Wah-tud ya ask for, Anthony?”

“I asked him to burn this goddamned place to the ground. That’s what I asked for.”

Santa picks up the letter from the table top, reads it, folds it, and puts it in his breast pocket.

“So be it.”

“Like I said, I don’t even like the fuckin’ place any more!” Tony says with finality.

“I don’t like it any more either. Somehow just don’t. BUT... I like you, TONE. I like you; I like the way you think and...I can see what you’re up against here, wife, two kids. I gotta tell you, Anthony, there’s no sorrier plight than a man trapped by his own creation. I know because I’m one too. One as well. Also. We’re like two peas, Tone. Two peas. Maybe we’re both fools.” Santa considers that. “If I thought you were the sensitive sort and you might be offended, I’d keep that ‘deniable fact to myself. But, fuck it, you know what I mean?”

“I do.”

“Your bones ever ache?”

“My bones, my head, my ass, my neck, my eyes, my teeth, my legs...”

“You ever feel desperate?”

“Every minute of every moment.”

“I like the way you put that. You are tenacious though, Tone. You’re always here. Dedicated. That should be worth somethin’. They oughta raise a statue to you in this town. Somethin’ big, you know, bronze, something... monumental. Without the plastic reindeer, ‘course.”

“Something the birds can shit on,” reflects Tony. Santa laughs hysterically. “That’s it!”

“Somethin’ anything that flies by can shit on,” says Tony. He ponders. “You’d think I’d be used to it by now.” He pulls his lip, ponders.

“You’d think...” says Santa. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to it.”

They both ponder that.

“We’re two of a kind, Tone. But, nobody just cares. Nobody just... uh, you know... no body just cares. No matter how dedicated we are, our work is meaningless... devoid of meaningfulness.”

“Has BECOME meaningless,” corrects Tony.

“OK, I’ll give you that. Has BECOME meaningless. Every year it’s the same damned thing... more meaningless than all years previous.”

“...and every year it gets worse too,” adds Tony.

“THAT’s IT! AND, Tone, did you ever consider this—if our work is so meaningless then what does that make us?”

“Bitter.”

“No, Tone, Nope. It makes us *deservedly* bitter. Decidedly, deservedly bitter. BUT, and that’s a big but, BUT, it also makes US useless. You ever think about that? They don’t need us, Tone. They don’t need us.”

“We’ve been thrown on the old scrap heap,” says Tony.

“When did that happen?” asks Santa. “I have to confess, Tone, I never saw it comin’.”

They both ponder that.

“Well, Anthony, here’s my proposal, why don’t you lock this place up and come with me out to the Coast for a few days? You know, get away from it all. I don’t think you’ll be missed. It’ll be a little relief for the wife as well. She’d probably be glad to be rid of you. What do you say?”

Tony thinks. He lifts a beer bottle to his mouth and finds it empty. Lifts another. It’s empty too.

“You couldn’t ask for a clearer message from the gods, Tone. You couldn’t ask for a clearer message.”

## **That same night**

Santa emerges from the bar to a very cold very dirty New Jersey city street. The long black limousine parked in front of the bar has no driver. Santa shivers in his fur coat. He can hardly believe it. “No! Not this again. Gregory? Gregory!”

A few steps down the street, Gregory is leaning up against a building and two men have him closed in. It’s a direct take on the previous evening. Santa approaches.

“Well, Gregory, I thought you’d put all this foolishness behind you.”

The first thug looks at Santa and his smile glows in the streetlight.

“Mr. Claus, Mr. CUH- L A U S-UH...How be you bein’, Mr. Cuh-la-us?”

“I’m tired Tyrico, and drunk, and I’m in no mood for games. I merely wish to go home.”

“Can we go with you? It’s cold out here, man, and me and Clarence got nothing scheduled for the rest of the evening. How bout if we hang with you?”

“Did you call those people like I asked you to?”

“Sure did. I’m going there for orientation in February.”

“Well, that’s good, but, no, Tyrico, I won’t take you two home with me tonight. However, tomorrow I’m

heading out to the Coast and you're both welcome to come along. How would that be?"

"How bout this... YOU pick US up right here bright an' early. How's that?"

"Bright and early... around one o'clock or so."

"We gonna drive out? I can drive the son-of-a-bitch out of that car of yours."

"Absolutely not."

"Aw, man, come on. We could be having one of them All American road trips."

"Well, Tyrico, this particular All American road trip will take place in a private jet."

"Man! You own your own airplane?"

"I writ you a letter," says Clarence quietly.

Santa turns toward him.

"Thank you, Clarence. I got that letter, and you don't need to thank me for doing my job. But, what about it, you got a few days to go out west with us? I'll pay for everything; you don't have to worry about that."

"You know, I don't know... you know?"

"What the fuck, Clarence? Man, are you crazy? Free trip to California. Free trip." Tyrico is truly excited by the prospect. "Free trip, man. California!"

Santa addresses Clarence nicely, "Well, think about it. And, once again, Tyrico, I find that your sensitivity is truly very touching."

Mockridge

“This ain’t real; this ain’t real. We goin... we goin... we be GONE to Cali-for-ni-aye.”

“We’ll pick you up here. Gregory, it’s time for me to go home.”

Gregory assists Santa back to the car.

Clarence grabs Tyrico by the elbow, whispers, “He’s really Santa Claus.”

“I believe he just might be.”

“No, Ty, I mean that man REALLY IS Santa Claus.”

“I’m startin’ to think so too, huh.”



As the limousine moves slinkily through the streets, the headlights reveal a truly sad old New Jersey town. There is no one else on the road until a small dark, banged-up, old car appears out of nowhere and draws up behind the limo. After a block or two of beeping and flashing headlights the dark little car pulls up beside the limo at a stop light. The window goes down, the driver takes a snowball from a tray sitting beside him on the seat. "HO HO HO you rich bastards!" he says as he throws a snow ball, which hits the side of the limo with a loud thunk.

Santa lets down his window in order to look for the cause of the noise. The driver of the car takes another snowball from the tray and lugs it, hitting Santa in the face.

"Ha-ha! Merry Christmas, you fat fuck!"

The car takes off speeding recklessly down the street as Santa is wiping the snow from his face. Santa is furious but in complete control.

"Gregory, how much horsepower does this thing have?"

"Eight HUNDRED and sixty-two!"

"That enough to catch that young hooligan?"

"It's enough to catch ANYTHING," Gregory says, with real assurance.

"Well, let's do it then."

The limo roars as it takes off. Santa pulls himself forward and shouts, "When we catch him I want you to run him off the road. As your employer, I am giving you a direct order, Gregory."

"Yes Sir, Santa."

Gregory is delighted as he guides the rocket through the slippery snow covered street.

Twenty minutes later, after a good chase, the small car is driven half-way into a dirty snow bank on the side of a dark road in the middle of the great New Jersey nowhere. The taillights of the crashed car and the flashing lights of the limousine cause a passing car to slow down and give wide berth to the accident. Gregory is extracting the hooligan from behind the wheel, with gloved hands. The kid is only semi-conscious, as Gregory leans him up against the side of his car. Santa is standing beside the open back door of his limo with his arms folded across his chest.

"Is he going to be OK, Gregory?"

"He's just shook-up a bit."

Santa approaches the kid, who startles.

"I was just havin' fun," says the kid unapologetically.

Santa points at a red mark on his own face, "See this? You call that fun?"

"I didn't mean anything by it."

“You didn’t mean anything by it?” Santa takes the kid by surprise, turns him around and slams him face first into the car. Then he pins his arms behind his back and spins him around to face Gregory. The kid struggles, but Santa has a good grip on him.

Santa whispers in his ear, “What did you mean when you shouted, Ho Ho Ho, you rich bastard?”

“It was a joke.”

“Really? Ho ho ho is a joke? You say, Ho ho ho, and chuck an ice ball at a gentleman on his way home in his town car, and that man’s supposed to laugh?”

“It was just a joke, dude.”

“Do you think Santa Claus would like that joke?”

“Santa Claus?” the kid snorts derisively. “What’s Santa Claus have to do with it?”

Santa addressed Gregory. “You pretty good with your fists, Gregory?”

“Not too bad, Sir.”

“Well, do you think you could hit this hooligan in the face hard enough to satisfy me? One good shot, you know, just as a joke.”

“Yes sir, if that’s what you’d like.”

“I think I’d like it a great deal. I’ll hold him and you hit him, right in the old kisser.”

Gregory steps toward the kid who is struggling to free himself from Santa’s grip.

“But, before you hit him, Gregory, I’d like you to say, “Ho ho ho, you young punk.”

The kid struggles, but Santa has a grip on him. Gregory says, “Ho ho ho, you young punk,” as he cocks his fist. The kid cowers and turns his head. “Wait, Gregory, wait. I’ve changed my mind,” says Santa, and the kid gasps with relief.

“I want you to say, ‘Merry Christmas, you skinny little moron’, then hit him”

Gregory smiles, nods, pleased to be of service.

“Merry Christmas, you skinny little moron,” he says, and hits the kid in the face.

“Now, throw him in the trunk!”

Gregory pushes a button on something in his hand, the trunk of the limo pops open and, though the kid puts up a valiant struggle, in the trunk he goes. Thunk! Gregory closes the lid.

As he’s getting back into the limo Santa stops to ask, “Oh, did you tell that young hooligan where he’s going, Gregory?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, that’s OK, maybe later.”

Santa gets into the limousine; Gregory shuts the door behind him, then goes around and gets in behind the wheel. Now, they’re off, leaving the half buried wreck in a snow bank, looking very festive with its red taillights ablaze, glistening fir trees all around, and the dark starry New Jersey night sky twinkling overhead.

## DECEMBER 28

On the following afternoon, they're inside Santa's private jet, before take-off. The plane is nicely appointed in dove gray colored leather and dark exotic wood trim with orange streaks. It has the style of an ocean-going yacht.

Clarence is sitting stiffly upright in a large leather chair looking straight ahead nervously. There is an empty seat beside him. Behind him, Tyrico has taken two seats to himself. Perfectly comfortable, he's stretched out with his long legs resting on a table in front of him, picking his teeth with a tooth pick and looking out the window. Across the aisle from Clarence is Tony. He looks stoic.

Santa stands in the aisle, with a hand on the seatbacks on either side. He's wearing a Captain's Hat. Olivia—a stately young black woman, dressed in uniform to match the interior of the plane, stands behind him. She has a genuine smile. She likes working for Santa. Tyrico, checking her out from behind, clearly likes what he sees.

Santa addresses Clarence. "You going to be alright?"

Tony leans across, pats the young man's shoulder. "Flying is nothin'," he assures him. "You'll be fine." Clarence asks Tony nervously, "You fly a lot?"

“Sure, I flew to a friend’s funeral in 1968 and to Memphis in 1992, during the single week they decided to shut down Graceland for repairs. I don’t know which was the more memorable experience. Unfortunately, all four flights made it safely, and I ended up right back where I started.”

Santa introduces Olivia. “Gentlemen, we have someone on board here whose job it is to make this trip a little more enjoyable. She’ll get you anything you might want as long as we’re in flight. That’s her job. So, don’t be afraid to ask. This is Olivia.”

Clarence asks nervously, “Is there still time for me to get off this plane, Santa?”

“I’m afraid it’s a little late for that Clarence, we’ve already begun to taxi.”

Tony says, “Once we’re off the ground you’ll forget your fears.”

Tyrico is grinning like a hyena. “Man oh man oh man oh man. You OWN this ship?”

“Your innocence, if well hidden, is a bit startling, Tyrico,” says Santa. “I lease this vehicle.”

“Lease? Only chumps lease.”

Santa sighs, “Yeah, well let me pass a little Music Industry wisdom on to you, Tyrico. If you live in it, drive it, fuck it or fly it, rent it.”

Tyrico thinks; says, “Oh, OK. OK yeah. I see the point. We got word-on-street like that, Santa. Hold it, cut it or move it, don’t taste it.”

“It’s not the same thing, Tyrico, but I gotta go up front now. Buckle up, folks. We’ll see you on the other end.” Santa Claus makes his way up the aisle to the cabin and goes inside and closes the door behind himself.

Olivia addresses the gathering. “Is there anything I can get you before we take off?”

Tyrico wants ‘Courvoisier...of course’, and says so in those exact words.

“Of course,” says Olivia.

She bends toward Clarence. “What would you like, sir? Can I get you anything?”

”I jus’ want to get off of this plane.”

Tyrico laughs, “Next stop, FIVE HOURS, Clarence. Best you learn to relax. Have a drink, man, they’re on the house.”

Minutes later as the engine hums louder, Clarence looks more frightened. Olivia takes a seat opposite, facing him, and begins to buckle herself in. Tyrico is leaned back in his chair with his eyes closed and a snifter of brandy held aloft. As the engine sounds grow and become deafening, he lowers the brandy, takes in the fragrance and smiles. Clarence’s fear grows steadily as the engine noise increases. Olivia smiles at Clarence, but he’s blind with fear.

Through the window the runway begins to drift off backwards and tilts away slowly, almost to vertical.

After they level out a bit, Olivia looks at Clarence with genuine concern. "You going to be OK?"

"I just want to go home."

"Relax, Clarence, man. This is LUXURY. We ain't had our share yet." Tyrico smiles at Olivia. "All *he* wants for CHRISTMAS is to get back to Alabama."

Olivia looks at Clarence, "You from Alabama?"

"Yes. I was brung up there," says Clarence with eyes tightly closed, "Tuskaloosa."

"That's amazing! I grew up in Tuskaloosa myself," says Olivia, "Whereabouts are you from?"

"Creeside," says Clarence between clenched teeth.

"Wrongside; right there where the E line goes over the bridge."

"You lived in Creekside? How did you end up here, with Santa?"

"How did you end up here, with Santa?"

"Well, he's pretty clever... He knows how to make things happen."

An hour later and things are calm inside the plane. Everyone seems to be either asleep or absorbed in thought. Suddenly the plane is in extreme turbulence and Santa emerges from the cockpit. He rides the aisle like a sailor, making his way back toward his guests. He stops long enough to shout back over his shoulder, "Can we get above this, Pilot? It's upsetting my guests."



As the plane bucks, Olivia straps herself in more tightly and sits bolt upright, clutching the arm rests. She's a professional though and trying to hide her fear. Sitting opposite her, Clarence is completely immersed in thought. He's beatific, angelic. Behind him, Tyrico is sitting straight up, smiling a forced smile. His dark sun glasses don't hide his fear however. Tony has moved to the back of the plane. He's indifferent. This is a man who surrendered so long ago that Death might be a welcome release. The set of his jaw is a challenge for Fate to take him.

The plane rocks, and rolls from side to side, as Santa makes his way to the back where Tony sits, braces himself against the ceiling of the jet.

"Everything OK back here, Anthony? I want my guests to be comfortable."

"Yeah. But you know I wanted to tell you I'm really sorry I scratched your limousine. I didn't even know the sleeves of this coat had buckles... Who puts buckles on a coat sleeve?"

"That's what happens when a man lets his wife buy his clothes for him."

"Still, I'm sorry."

"These things happen. You OK otherwise?"

"Whatever."

Tony ponders what he just said. Realizing the source he snorts.

“I guess I got that from my kid. That’s Gina’s entire vocabulary these days.”

“How old is Gina?”

“She’s ten and deeply disappointed in life. It’s all WHATEVER. You want some ice cream? Whatever. You want a smack in the face? Whatever. She’s ten years old and bored to death.”

“Well that’s unfortunate, Anthony. She should write to Santa; I hope she still believes in Santa.”

“Ha. That kid don’t believe in nothing. I’m goin’ broke tryin’ to keep up the illusion for her little sister. I told her, Santa better show up soon if you’re gonna get half the crap you kids want for Christmas.”

“What does she say to that?”

“Yeah sure, Daddy, whatever...”

Bucking turbulence throws Santa about the room.

“I gotta get back up front.” He makes his way forward and things begin to level out almost immediately.

Later, when things are calmer, Olivia’s talking quietly to Clarence. “What made you leave Creekside?”

Clarence holds up his left hand showing that two middle fingers are missing.

“I was asked to leave.”

“My goodness, that looks pretty serious. Who did that to you?”

“White man. Fellah named Ray-Willard Tubbs. He didn’t like me so much, I guess.”

“What happened?”

“Oh, we was carryin’ on past midnight and I guess Ray-Willard Tubbs didn’t want to hear us black folk laughin’ and havin’ a good time, when he was tryin’ to sleep. He comes chargin’ out the house with a shotgun and he pushed through the crowd, and he walked right up to me, and he told me to stand up, and I did. He told me to put my hands up and I did. And, then... well, then he put his shot gun on my frettin’ hand and, well...” Clarence shows her his hand again.

Olivia is aghast. “He pulled the trigger? Oh, my god. I guess Ray-Willard Tubbs doesn’t know this is the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”

“Well, I guess he don’t. I didn’t stick around to educate the man. I run off into the woods and, after three days of worry, I took off for anywhere they might never heard of me or Ray-Willard Tubbs. Next thing I knew I was in New York City.”

“So, how did you get fixed up with Mr. Courvoisier over there?”

“I was freshly mugged, officially welcomed as Ty calls it, walking around lost an’ hungry in New York City, and this limo pulls up and he was at the wheel. He axed did I need a ride and I said, I ain’ got no money, and he said, you don’t need no money

to ride this train, Brother. I don't know why he picked me. Plenty of us to choose from."

Tyrico speaks from behind his sun glasses, "Don't forget to tell her how much I paid you that day, for riding like a king in the back of that fresh-caught sturgeon."

Clarence smiles. "It's true. We drove it to Jersey where a man gave him some money and Ty gave me \$400 right off the top. We been workin' the street together since that."

Olivia is leaning so close to Clarence that she can touch him. She wants to, she doesn't. She wants to however.

"So, you say you were carryin' on when this man shot you. Why did he choose you?"

"Oh I was the instigator. I was the one with the guitar. I was the 'tainment, the singer. All the girls liked me. All the men were jealous, specially the white men."

"I bet they were. But this couldn't have happened in Tuskalooosa, I think I'd have heard about it."

"Oh, well, thereabouts, out in the countryside. Big Night, big time, Friday night fish fry."

"So, you had a following? What's your name?"

"Turtle Barnes."

Olivia is delighted. "Turtle Barnes? I remember that name. When I was a little girl you were playin'

all the fish fries. Turtle Barnes. ‘Haps I even saw you play.”

“Yeah, then I was Little Turtle Barnes.”

“Well, Turtle Barnes, You’ll have to play sometime fo...Oh, I’m sorry. I mean, I suppose that...you...”

“Oh, I can play. I just can’t play like I used to. It’s my frettin’ hand. Took me three years to get it goin’ again. Upside down and backward, but I can play. An’ that blast didn’t do no harm to my vocals.”

“Well, Turtle Barnes, if I can come up with a guitar can you play us a song?”

“Sure can.”

Olivia is inspired, delighted. “You wait right there, Mr. Turtle Barnes.”

She goes to a cabinet and takes out a guitar case, places it on a seat, uncases the thing and hands it to Clarence with raised eyebrows. Clarence takes it, tunes it, sights down the neck, smiles.

“Man, this is a nice machine. This yours?”

”Nuh. Santa always has that sort of thing on board. He seems to know what might be needed for a smooth flight.”

Clarence strums the thing a bit, runs a few riffs on it, and begins to sing, slowly, sweetly:

“Dis your bird, Love? It got your mark upon its wings.

Dis your bird, Love? It got your mark upon its wings.

Mockridge

When 'sees you comin'  
oh how that lit' birdie sings."

Tyrico, with his eyes closed speaks.  
"That's the song of a sensitive man."  
He raises his shades to address Olivia,  
"Only time he ain't shy is when he's behind that  
guitar. Play that Parkin' Space song, Clarence."

Clarence nods, starts an up tempo shuffle, sings:  
"Come when I get home my parkin' place is still  
warm?  
'Come when I get home, my parkin' place is still  
warm?  
I know somethin's not right, the light in the garage  
is still on."

Olivia laughs, "Oh, Turtle, you are good."

"Come when I pull in you're always messin' with  
your hair?  
'Come when I pull in, you're busy messin' with your  
hair?  
And there's fresh oil on the drive like maybe some  
Chevy's been there.

"It's my house. It's my garage  
It's my parkin' space for my dirty old Dodge  
Don't want so much as a trace  
Any other car in my parkin' space...uh-huh"

He dives into a tasty little solo riff with some difficulty. The effort is written in his face. It's a bit choppy, a bit awkward, but tasty.

Clarence has a new fan. "Turtle Barnes, you are really good."

Clarence comes out of the break singing.  
"Get off that phone and look me in the eye  
Get on off that phone and look your daddy in the eye  
" 'Ready got the blues so don't bother tryin' t' lie."

Olivia and Tyrico join in, somewhat awkwardly, but with genuine amusement, for the chorus.

Clarence cuts the tempo to lead them through it.  
"It's my *house*. It's *my* garage  
It's my parkin' space  
for my *dirty*, rusty old, Dodge  
You know it's a public disgrace  
T' see some shiny new Saab in my parkin'  
space...uh-huh"

A speaker clicks on.  
Santa says, "Buckle up folks, we're about to land in San Francisco."

As the gang descends the steps, a limousine waits for them. The back door is open in a welcoming manner. Gregory is leaning against the car. Tyrico, first down the steps, runs across the tarmac and dives headfirst into the limo. Inside, he stretches out and places his hands behind his head. Tony and Santa are next down the steps, and in that order. Clarence is making his way down slowly, carefully, behind them. Olivia's keeping an eye on him. She genuinely likes the man and wishes him well; you can see it in her eyes.

"You try to enjoy yourself out here now, Turtle."

Santa and Tony are standing at the limo now, waiting for Clarence. Gregory tips his hat to Tony, "Welcome to California, Sir. Would you like me to place that raincoat in the trunk?"

Tony sees the scratch that he made on the car in New Jersey, before they took off. He stammers, "This is the... This is the same..." He's so confused he can't even complete the sentence. He touches the scratch and inspects it carefully as he hands his raincoat to Gregory. "Is this the same...? This can't possibly be the same..."

Tony studies Gregory's face as he accepts the rain coat, and is staggered by what he sees. He can not believe it. He whispers to Santa, "Isn't that the same driver?!"



“Well, Tone, a good driver is hard to find, and I consider myself lucky to have Gregory.”

“But, he dropped us off *in Jersey*... didn't he? And this car... but how?... I mean how? HOW is that possible?”

“Well, don't you worry about that Anthony, we're here to relax a little and forget about work.”

As they get in, Gregory opens the trunk and tosses the raincoat in on top of the pleading young hooligan, before closing it with a solid thump.

As he's getting into the back, Santa stops to ask, “Did you tell that young hooligan Merry Christmas, Gregory?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, that's OK, maybe later.”

## DECEMBER 29

Outside on the large balcony of a luxury hotel in San Francisco, Tyrico sits leaning back in a large ornate iron chair with his cowboy booted feet up on the rail. He has a perma-smile plastered to his face. Even through his sun glasses anyone could tell that the man is relaxed, completely absorbed by unshakeable contentment. Inside he's saying. "I was born to live this life. I was born to live this life."

He reaches for a bottle of beer on the cast iron table beside him and finds it empty. He waggles it in the air and the young hooligan appears at the huge open French door behind him.

"You want another one?"

"Please; if you would be so kind."

Moments later Tyrico is in the same position, still quite pleased with things. He's calmly folding paper airplanes from a stack of hotel stationary, which is pinned down under a snow globe with a cable car inside. There's a fresh beer beside the stack of paper. The young hooligan is leaning on the rail which overlooks the Bay, Alcatraz, Richmond, the Berkeley hills, the Bay Bridge, and the city below. "Another," says the young man and stretches an open hand toward Tyrico, who hands him a paper airplane. He tosses it over the side and watches it

as it swoops and dives and is carried in ascending spirals for a bit before diving straight down as if shot from the sky.

“Another.”

Santa is now standing in the open French doors.

“What are you two up to?”

“Nothin’,” says the kid and casts another paper airplane into the wind.

“For cryin’ out loud,” says Santa critically, “what’s wrong with you?”

“I didn’t mean nothin’ by it,” says the kid reflexively. “We were just having fun.”

“Do you think the people down there, who get hit with one of these things, think it’s just fun?”

Tyrico sits up and lifts his shades and comes to the defense of the kid. “Those planes don’t mean nothin’ to anyone down there, Santy. So, you get hit with a paper airplane, so what?”

“Well, Tyrico,” says Santa, stepping out onto the balcony, “that’s precisely my point. Those airplanes mean nothing to anyone down there. If you’re gonna try to make contact, engage those people, why not hit them with a positive experience?”

Santa reaches into a side pocket of his jacket and pulls out a wad of bills. “Stick one of these in each of those planes and you’ll be sending a much more meaningful message.”

He hands the wad of bills to Tyrico, who looks at the bills with some amazement. “You want me to fold a hundred dollar bill inside a paper airplane?” “You’re right,” says Santa, “You better put a couple in there.”

“It’ll probably take us a while before we get the placement just right, so they’ll sail good.”

“Well, take your time, figure it out, we’ve got nothing important scheduled today,” says Santa.

The young holligan goes over to Tyrico and looks at the wad of money.

“How are you doing today, my young man?” asks Santa. “Fully recovered?”

“Uh... Can I have some of this? I mean, I could use it as much as whoever’s down there.”

“Sure, why not? Take a few for yourself, but don’t take so much it interferes with your learning experience. I don’t want you to have to go through this lesson again.”

Tyrico hands the kid several bills and, taking a few for himself, quickly pockets them. Then they start folding bills into their paper airplanes.

Inside, Clarence is playing a guitar and Tony is lounging in an oversized coach flipping through the channels on a large flat TV. Tony is bored. He’s not even looking at the TV most of the time. Sometimes he has his head hanging down, sometimes he’s looking up at the ceiling, but he keeps on clicking

steadily through the channels. Santa pushes his legs away to make room, sits down next to him. “You need to think about the comfort of others occasionally, Anthony.”

There is a knock upon the door. Santa gets up slowly, with a martyr-like sigh. “It could be no other way. A man can’t even sit down and psychoanalyze his friends without interruption.” Santa opens the door and a bellman hands him a newspaper. “Here’s the paper you ordered, sir.” “Well, thank you son, I appreciate it.”

Santa hands the young man a tip. He unfolds the small newspaper and starts to read it while walking back to the couch. He sits down near Tony.

Tony continues staring at the TV. Clarence continues working on his guitar.

“Say, here’s something interesting. Look at this, Anthony.” He hands Tony the newspaper, points out something within. “That part right there, read that.”

Anthony reads it. “Who’s Ray-Willard Tubbs?”

Clarence stops playing for a beat, then continues playing softly. Santa mocks surprise. “Did somethin’ happen to Ray-Willard?” he asks.

“Yeah, it says here that he shot himself in the foot and lost three toes,” says Tony. “Is this supposed to mean something to me?”

“Three toes,” says Santa, “Well, so what? Three toes is nothing.”

“No, but it says the guy was an amateur competitive dancer of some sort—tango it says—and he was expected to go to some national tango competition.”

“Let me see that paper. I didn’t read that part.” Santa looks at the article.

“Well, that’s his picture alright. But, if that’s the Ray-Willard I knew, he certainly kept that part of his life well hid.” Santa reads the article. “Yep that’s him alright. Says here he’ll probably never tango again.”

“Tough break for that guy...” says Tony.

“Ah well,” says Santa, “there’s just no justice in this world.”

Santa sits smugly for a while, smacking his lips.

“You want to look at this newspaper, Clarence?”

“No, sir...uh no, Santa, sir.”

“Paper comes from down where you come from.”

“That’s OK, sir...uh, Santa, sir. Thank you.”

“Well there’s no need to thank me, Clarence.

Sometimes these things just happen.” Santa gets up. “I think I’ll have a drink. Either of you fellows want something to drink? Suddenly, I just feel like celebratin’.”

## DECEMBER 30

It's late afternoon and Tony is laying on his back in the middle of the floor looking up at the chandelier. He's pulling on his lip, and alternately tugging on the skin of his throat. Santa is sitting in a large wing-back chair, with reading glasses, reading a large book. He closes the book in order to look at his friend on the floor.

"This has got to end, Anthony. We gotta get out; there's a whole world out there; we can't just sit around in here all week. The kids have all gone; they've found something to do. I'll give you one more day in that funk of yours, but tomorrow night we're going out. And I know just the place."

"What's the point?" sighs Tony.

"Well, Tone, I can't tell you that. But I can tell you this: I understand."

"Do you?"

"Yes, Anthony, I do. I understand that you're feeling trapped."

"AM undeniably, irrefutably TRAPPED."

"...that you are. You're trapped and that Life is a constant struggle just to stay afloat, and now your kids are starting to see things in that murky light."

"That's the part that worries me the most."

"Anthony, I know that. And that's what makes you a good man."

"Throw in \$4 and that'll get me a cup of coffee."

“Not in this town, but I know what you mean.”

Santa goes back to reading his book. Tony goes back to tugging on his waddle. After a bit, Santa closes the book again.

“I’m kind of in the same situation—not exactly—but... well maybe not. But, like you, I work hard. And, like you I’ve grown weary of my work. It doesn’t really fulfill me any more. AND...and I’d like to just walk away from it, but, like you, Anthony, I can’t. People are dependent on me. On top of that, Tone, I’m not feeling needed; I’m not feeling appreciated. I’ve never really ever gotten the thanks I think I should be getting.”

Tony pushes himself up onto one elbow and looks at Santa with compassion.

“Just one time,” Santa continues, “I’d like to experience the gratitude, the appreciation my good work deserves...get something more than just stale cookies.”

“I know what you mean,” says Tony and collapsed down onto his back again.



## DECEMBER 31

Outside The Holy Bagel, in North Beach.

It's almost 10 PM. Even from outside you can see that this place is PACKED. There is a small crowd outside, waiting in line, hoping to get in. Santa and Tony come down the street and stop in front of the bar. There's a huge sign outside declaring: *You think you can do a pretty good Christopher Walken?* WELCOME TO THE FIFTH ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL WALKEN OFF! \$10,000 FIRST PRIZE!

Santa stops, reads the sign, reflects, "Hey, you know, Anthony, some people think I look like this guy Walken."

From the way they all look at Santa it's pretty clear people in line think he *is* Walken.

"Well if you do, I never noticed it."

"They say I even talk like the man."

"Yeah, whenever some jerk says I talk like I'm from the Bronx I tell 'em, I'm from Jersey, you moron!"

There is a young man standing upon a crate of some sort with a sign around his neck which says, "I SHOULD HAVE WON". He's reciting from a phone book, doing a fairly remarkable imitation of Christopher Walken.

"Chany, Adam, 137 Melbourne 415 36281..."

Chany, Aaron, 415..."

Santa says, "Say, he's pretty good."

The bouncer, stationed outside the bar, stops a young man trying to get in.

"Hey. Hey-hey hey... Where're you goin'?"

"I just came out of there, dude. You remember me..."

"You got a hand stamp?" The kid shrugs.

"Get outta here." The bouncer makes a loud announcement to the people in line, "If you DON'T got a ticket, you're wasting your time. If you DON'T got a hand stamp, you're not getting' in."

Several people break from the line and walk away disgusted. A couple walk up and flash their hand stamps and he starts unhooking the velvet rope to let them in. As he's doing that he sees Santa and Tony, and quickly bars the couple's way in order to let Santa and Tony go first. While making large urgent signs to someone inside he continues to hold the couple at bay. They are none too pleased of course. Santa and Tony are greeted by several people inside all bowing, smiling, deliriously obsequious.

Now another bouncer pushes people out of the way for Santa and Tony. "Sir. Go right in."

Santa whispers, "See? What did I tell you? They think I'm him."

Off to one side, away from the bar is a large separate room crowded with people seated at small round tables. As they are escorted in a waitress appears as if on springs. She is all over herself to welcome them and show them to a table. She beckons and a third bouncer appears at her side and assists her in rousting four startled people from what must be the nicest tables in the joint—front row, center stage. There is a bit of a scene over this but the bouncer is *persuasive* as he leads one of the former occupants away by the elbow. Meanwhile, the stage is empty.

Once they're seated the waitress leans in to Tony and says, "I hope you enjoy the show... those people Ron just threw out are the sponsors."

Almost immediately Jeremy, the founder of the event—is standing at their table. He's not happy. He's in torment. He has on a headphone and he seems to be speaking to himself as he arrives. "Please, just do IT! JUST do it, please," he's saying. Things aren't going well. He's frantic because a dozen last second things are demanding his attention, and now this. He leans toward Santa. "What are you doing out here?" His pleading is part reprimand.

The people around Santa are all craning their necks to get a look at the man, and hear what's being said.

The females show their interest openly. Most of the males too, but some make a point of their indifference—a peculiar stance for anyone to take while attending such an event. So what if Christopher Walken is sitting right in front of me. I paid \$300 dollars to watch others do poor imitations of the man.

Santa, looking around at the crowd of adoring Walken fans, smiles, nods, waves.

“WHAT are you doing out here?” Jeremy repeats through clenched teeth.

“Just basking in the love,” Santa says.

Jeremy leans in toward Santa’s ear and hisses, “I don’t have time right now to explain how much I admire you or to tell you how many years I’ve idolized you. But YOU ARE DESTROYING ME!”

Santa is genuinely startled, but unapologetic.

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that, but I’m not who you think I am.”

“Look. Please. First—you being here is a complete surprise, considering how your people have treated me. Second—you’d be much better off BACK-stage, not sitting out here. And THIRD...” He stands up and looks around desperately. “What have you done with our sponsors?” He stands up on his tip toes, and looks around frantically. “What have you done with our sponsors?!”

Santa tugs on the kid's sleeve.

"OK. OK. Just try to calm down. First—my presence here is a complete surprise to me as well. I hadn't really planned it. Second— I'm not who you think I am. And third—your sponsors are over there having a discussion with a couple very large kinda meaty fellows."

Jeremy looks in the direction Santa points. The sponsors are surrounded with bouncers and there is a heated, wildly animated, argument going on in front of the bar.

Jeremy is beside himself. He's speaking to himself in titters, "I don't have time for this. I don't have time for this. I don't have TIME for this!"

He returns his attention to Santa.

"I love you. I love you. I have loved you since I was a child, but you are turning a five year long dream into a nightmare, Mister Walken... sir. I don't even know if the lighting guy can get a spot on you out here." While he's saying all of this he's monitoring the situation with the sponsors.

Santa tugs on his sleeve again and drags him back down to whisper into his ear. "I'm not who you think I am."

Jeremy, not knowing what else to do, goes along with it, "Who are you then?"

"I'm Santa Claus."

"Oh, Jesus. I don't have time for this. I just don't."

He fights his way through the crowd and runs to the spot where the bouncers now have their hands on one of the male sponsors and are about to drag him toward an exit. He arrives just in time to intervene and offer an apology.

Jeremy is soon entangled in the process of alternately talking to the bouncers, the sponsors, into his headphone, to the sponsors, and to a young man who appears suddenly beside him no doubt with more bad news. This young man could be Jeremy's twin. Jeremy sends his twin off, with brief instruction, in the direction of the stage, and continues consoling the sponsors.

Santa leans back and puts his feet up on a chair near the apron of the stage. Tony is looking through the crowd, beyond the confrontation between sponsors and bouncers and Jeremy, at the barkeep. The guy's miserable. It's in his look, his stance, his movement. He's oblivious to waitresses yelling at him, beautiful young women passing by, glasses being thrown up against the mirrored counter behind his head.

A waitress appears beside Tony. "I have some champagne coming. It may be a few clicks until we can get to the bar."

Tony indicates the barkeep with a nod and asks her, "What his story?"

A 2<sup>nd</sup> waitress passing by says, “He’s a prick, that’s his story.”

Tony’s waitress grimaces animatedly at the other’s bitterness. “My guess is that *she* doesn’t like him very much. But, he’s OK, just never been happy here. Typical bartender.”

“That’s typical huh?”

“Yeah, they’re all like that. I guess it comes with the job,” says the waitress. “He was happy here for about three months...”

She dismisses the man with a wave. “He feels trapped. He feels put-upon... whatever. Sometimes he’s an...” She lean over and whispers the word to Tony. “That’s typical too.”

She dismisses the barkeep again, this time with a snort and a rolling of the eyes. “All bartenders are... Oh wait... champagne’s ready!” She starts making her way toward the bar.

On stage Jeremy’s twin is adjusting things, mic stands, a podium, cables along the front of the stage when he’s spotlighted. He looks up as the miraculously calm crowd comes instantly alive and raucous. He touches his ear, responds into his headphone, and approaches the microphone awkwardly.

“Uh, I know you’re anxious to see the finalists. I’m sorry it took us so long to set up. And uh...well...we

also promised the manager we'd wrap it up in time for the New Year's celebration to get underway. So, I guess we should just, uh..." He covers the mic and looks off stage for help. "Should I... me? Jeremy isn't...? OK." He takes his hand from the mic. "Uh. So, let's get rolling. Third place goes to Winston Jefferson Wong, from right here in our fair city. Mr. Wong..." He exits off stage as Winston Wong, a bespectacled skinny kid in a badly fitting light colored suit walks awkwardly on with a huge grin.

Wong speaks in heavy Chinese inflected English. "It was not easy for a Chinese kid like me to enter such a contest. When I told my wife I was going to enter the Walken-Off she said (imitating wife) 'You most certainly are NOT Mr. Winston Wong.' Then, after we saw last year's show, she said (imitating wife again), 'You do better Christopher Walken than those guys.' So, here I am." He beams around proudly, "My wife wants me to tell you that the \$10,000 first prize had no part in our decision to enter. Third place, not too bad for a kid from Chinatown, heh? Walk 6 blocks and pick up a check for 3 grand."

Winston Wong closes his eyes and gathers himself before doing a flawless W. C. Fields imitation: "What do you mean you gave me water by mistake... you tryin' t' poison me." Immediately, in his normal voice, he follows up, "Oop, sorry, wrong



competition.” This goes over well with the anxious audience.

“Now, I’m going to attempt something very difficult to do: Christopher Walken as George Burns talking to H. Allen Smith. Most of you don’t know who George Burns was and nobody here knows H. Allen Smith—but, well anyway, here goes.”

Now, Mr. Wong takes out a big cigar and does a flawless Christopher Walken imitation.

“I was visiting my very dear old friend, H. Allen Smith the other day. Smith had a bunch of buddies up for the weekend, at his place in Connecticut. E. B. White was there, and H. P. LOVECRAFT. H. L. Mencken. J. D. Salinger. Probably ee cummings. P. G. Wodehouse was an honored guest. Now that I think about it, I was the only guy there who didn’t part his name on the left.” He looks around at the audience to see if they are with him. They seem willing.

“At any rate, Monday morning comes around and I climb on the commuter train along with the rest of the schlubs. I sit down next to a guy who’d apparently been a guest at a similar wing ding. While the train sits in the station he’s hanging out the window, chatting away with his host. He’s saying what a great time he’d had. He’s sayin’ how nice their house is, and how good the food was. And as the train gets under way he shouts, Thanks again, and your wife is a fantastic piece of ass.”

The crowd is riveted.

Wong, as Walken, continues. “Well, I knew I must have heard it wrong, but I couldn’t figure out what else the guy might’ve said. It bothered me all the way into town.”

Wong, looking pretty much like Walken might look if he were a skinny young Chinese kid in a badly fitting light colored suit, peers out into the audience. The crowd is right there with him; they’re ready.

“So, when we arrived, the guy stood up and started gathering his things. And I asked him, ‘Say, you know, back there when we got on this train, I thought I heard you tell that guy that his wife was a fantastic piece of ass?’ The man laughed and said, ‘Yeah. She’s not really, but he’s such a nice guy, I didn’t want to hurt his feelings.’”

Santa is applauding wildly along with everybody else. Several bouncers take the stage and one of them goes directly to the mic, as the banner declaring: WELCOME TO THE FIFTH ANNUAL INTERN’L “WALKEN” OFF FINALS! is replaced with a sign saying HAPPY NEW YEAR.

The bouncer at the mic says, “Soon as this is over we are going to clear the saloon for the New Year’s celebration. Unless you have tickets to the New Year’s event please leave. He flexes his biceps and

makes a hammy threatening gesture. Those of you who have tickets, get them out we'd like to see them." To someone off stage he says, "You want me to introduce the next guy for you?"

Jeremy comes to the mic. "I'm sorry, we're being rushed. So, very quickly now: SECOND PLACE in this year's Fourth er, FIFTH Annual International Walken Off Competition goes to..." (He listens to his headset) "Rudy... Nonnam, NONNAM? He's also from right here, well, just around the corner actually. He lives in Washington Square park with his dog, Mitzy, Mr. Rudy Nonnam. Rudy..."

Jeremy exits off stage and Rudy, a bewildered, slightly crazed sort of undeniably homeless guy in what appear to be a series of increasingly larger overcoats, ambles on with a pit-bull on a string and a small pizza box under one arm. He stares out into the audience cupping his eyes.

He looks down and speaks sharply to the dog. "OK, you sit right there and don't move a muscle; this is business."

He looks around nervously, as if he might be jumped from behind at any moment, then addresses the audience.

"Every homeless fuck in this town's gotta have a pit bull... I think they passed that law maybe four years ago." He displays the pizza box.

”Say, any of you want the last slice? I didn’t tamper with it in any way; it’s completely untainted.” He opens the box, looks in. “Oh, MAN! I can’t believe I been carrying an empty box around all this time. GOD damnit! I think it was Mark Twain who said, There is no sadder sight then an empty pizza box.”

Jeremy’s twin comes up behind him, scaring the heck out of him, and says something into his ear. The twin remains in place until Rudy starts speaking again, then moves back into the shadows.

“I’m told I gotta move on. So, one day I saw this big sign saying something about a Wacken-Off competition and I just kinda thought it was another PERFEC’ Fuckin’ ‘xample of San Francisco embarrassing itself in the eyes of the entire Indian nation. An’ I’m not saying I wasn’t disgusted at the idea, I was. Look at these eyes. Am I lyin’? But then I thought, There’s no fuckin’ way in the goddamned Christ that I’m gonna put up with this shit. You wanta Wack off do it in the proper place, don’t do it in my favorite bar. So, I come by here to wage my protest, an’ O’Keefe, he fuckin’ JUMPS right over the counter and drags me up to this kid with a clip board, some big important smug-ass skinny little fucker with a clip board and plenty more important things to do besides speak with me. I seen him around here somewhere.”

He looks into the empty pizza box again. “Just in case.” He explains. “You never know.” He shrugs and discards the box.

“O’Keefe is sayin’ t’me, ‘RUDY, YOU GOTTA get in on this, man. You gotta get in on this. You’re perfec’ for it!’ An’ I didn’t even know what IT was. O’Keefe was explaining IT to me when this same kid—the one buzzin’ around here all night—busier than ever. So, he HEARS what I’m sayin’ and he just signs me right up. I think O’Keefe paid the thirty two fifty or whatever. And well, three months later—after I discover what IT is—I do the try-out, and now they’re tellin’ me I won the thing.” He looks around. “Is that right? I won? Yeah? No? OK, so NOW they’re tellin’ me it’s second place. So, they wanted me to tell how I got here. So, that’s it. That’s how I got here.”

Rudy Nonnam bows. He startles and looks back at someone whispering to him from behind.

“Oh, you want me to? OK. So, now I’m gonna do my imitation of Christopher Walken—who many people have gotten the idea somehow that I am his bastard son, which is a rumor I never even started. This is Christopher Walken doin’ a Bob Dylan song. If you were here for round three you may remember it. An’ I have no idea why all you think it’s so fuckin’ funny either. But, here goes.”

He looks down at his perfectly quiet dog curled up at his feet. “You just sit right the fuck there and don’t you move! This is business!” He smiles at the crowd somewhat apologetically. “Dogs!”

Rudy then does a pure Christopher Walken take on the Bob Dylan song, Country Pie.

“Just like old Saxophone Joe.  
When he’s got th’ hogshead up on his toe.  
Oh me, oh my  
Love that country pie.

Listen to the fiddler play  
When he’s playin’ to the break o’ day  
Oh me, oh my  
Love that country pie

Raspberry, strawberry, lemon or lime,  
What do I care?  
Blueberry, apple, cherry, pumpkin or plum  
Call me for dinner, Honey, I’ll be there

Saddle me up a big fat goose  
Tie me on ‘er and turn ‘er loose  
Oh me, oh my  
Love that country pie

I don’t need much that ain’t no lie  
Ain’ runnin’ a race  
Get to me my country pie

I won't throw it up in anybody's face

Shake me up that old peach tree  
Little Jack Horner got nothin' on me  
Oh me , oh my,  
Love that country pie'

Rudy bows, and, naturally the crowd goes wild, He bows several times more as he and his dog walk off stage.

Santa leans over to Tony and whispers, "Let's go."  
"What? Don't you want to see what the winner does?"

"I've had enough, let's go. We can go somewhere else if you'd like."

"No, I'll meet you back at the hotel..."

"You're a good man, Anthony."

They start making their way through the crowd.

Outside they part ways.

Meanwhile, at the foot of the stage Jeremy is more desperate than ever with a dozen things up in the air. He's talking animatedly into his headset and running up the steps to the stage where he begins pacing in a small circle. The waitress who took care of Santa is at the apron of the stage trying to get his attention. Eventually she grabs his pant leg. Jeremy is barely under control...

“WHAT? What is it?”

“I just thought you might like to know that Christopher Walken just went a-walkin’ out.”

Jeremy collapses to his knees, “WHAT?”

“Your golden egg just rolled out the front door.”

Jeremy flies off the stage, fights his way through the crowd, and out the front door, talking on his headset all the way. His twin finds himself once again, in front of the microphone. There is a bouncer right behind him talking animatedly in a threatening manner.

“Well, it’s me again. Uh, I know you’re, uh...well...I’m told we’re running out of time. I guess we should just, uh...We should? You want me to...? And NOW for the WINNER of the FOURTH ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL...FIFTH annual?—FIFTH annual INTER-national Walken Off Competition.” He gestures magnanimously toward the wings. “Llewellyn Fitzhugh. Llewellyn!”

Llewellyn, a huge man with a protruding belly, dressed only in a small dirty once-white t-shirt and oversized jeans takes the stage. In his natural voice he announces:

“Colonel Jessep, but with a twist. You can see I dressed for the part. Oh, and my apologies to Aaron Sorkin, the truly great screenwriter, who I admire.”

He smoothes down his hair and takes on a slightly crazed look, while pulling a sock puppet out of his pocket.



The sock puppet speaks in a high squeaky voice.

“I want answers!”

Llewellyn responds as Christopher Walken:

“You want answers?”

High squeaky voice:

“I want the truth. I want the truth.”

“Make up your mind. Which is it, do you want answers or do you want the truth?”

High squeaky voice:

“I want the truth. I want the truth.”

“Unfortunately, you can’t handle the...”

High squeaky voice:

“I want the truth. I want it. I want it.”

“Well, OK then. Just relax, for god’s sake.”

As somebody emerges from the shadows upstage and touches him on the shoulder, Llewellyn jumps. It’s Santa. “You want the truth?”

Llewellyn’s mouth drops open, everyone in all directions is frozen. Llewellyn drops his sock puppet. “What? Oh my god. What? Oh my god, what?”

“I’ll give you the truth if that’s what you want,” says Santa casually.

And, well you can imagine the response.

Jeremy rushes to the stage and, in the midst of the screaming and applause hollers, “CHRISTOPHER WALKEN everybody!”

Jeremy hands Santa a mic and he speaks,  
“Actually, son, I’m Santa Claus.”  
“It’s SANTA CLAUS EVERYBODY!”  
This leads to more mayhem.

When they finally calm down, Santa asks again,  
“You want the truth?”  
The entire crowd responds “YEAH!!”  
“You want the truth?!”  
”YEAH!!”

He walks to the very front of the stage with his  
head held down.  
Santa looks weary. He has never looked more  
sincere in his life. He sighs.  
“OK, I’ll tell you the truth.”

“The truth is that we live in a world with kids, and  
those kids want toys. Who’s gonna provide all those  
kids with the toys they want? You? Winston  
Jefferson Wong here? No? How ‘bout you,  
Llewellyn? No? No, *I alone* have that responsibility.  
It falls on me. And, because I take my job seriously,  
because I handle my job flawlessly, and  
expeditiously, YOU get to sleep-in a little bit on  
Christmas morning. You have that luxury. You also  
have the luxury of not knowing who’s naughty and  
who’s so nice it sets their own mother’s teeth on  
edge. And though my existence to you is laughable  
and the source of your entertainment...”

He gestures broadly indicating the event he finds himself in the midst of.

“...the truth is— you *want* me out there. You *need* me out there. Without me, there would be no Christmas presents. No morning mayhem, no tears, no squeals of falsified delight, no disappointment.”

He looks out at the crowd to see if they’re getting any of this.

“I have neither the time nor the inclination to explain myself to any so-called daddy who doesn’t know his own daughter’s birthday let alone whether she wants the pink or the blue Wubbykin. You call me jolly, you call me *the fat guy in the red suit*; nobody ever calls me **Mr.** Claus, and nobody ever thanks me for the work I do. A plate of stale cookies is all the thanks I get. It’s a slap in the face.” The poor man sighs deeply.

“The truth is, I’d like a simple sincere thank you once in a while, but maybe that’s expecting too much. I may not like you and I may not like your little brats, but I do what is expected of me. I do my job. If you don’t like the way I’m handling it, I suggest you pick up a sack of toys and climb on board. Otherwise I don’t give a damn what you want, and it’s none of your business whether I’m jolly or not—I’m here for the little ones!”

Santa strikes a heroic pose, bows and bows and bows. The lights come up on stage and Jeremy is there with a check and a plaque of some sort. He hands it to Llewellen without ceremony and stands patting Christopher Walken on the back and beaming, as the crowd... well we've been through that once already.

Jeremy announces proudly, "MISTER Christopher Walken!" He turns to Santa, "Can I hug you?"

"I would prefer that you didn't."

"MISTER Christopher Walken!"

Santa bows one more time graciously and heads backstage. Here's Rudy with his dog. Rudy approaches, hand extended.

"Let me shake your hand. That was incredible, man! You sounded just like him. MAN, that was incredible. No wonder you guys won." They shake hands.

Santa wipes his hand off on Rudy's jacket.

Rudy's maybe a bit offended.

"Just kiddin' there, Buddy." Santa pats Rudy on the back. Holding him out at arm's length, he looks carefully at the grimy young man.

"You might be one of Walken's bastard sons after all... now that I get a close look at you."

Jeremy is at his side again, pulling him away.

"Don't mean to be rude, Rudy, but I got business to attend to."

The crowd outside is chanting: WALKEN WALKEN WALKEN! Jeremy tells Santa something. Santa stops. He's amazed at what he just heard. "How many?"

Jeremy shouts in Santa's ear.

Santa is clearly impressed. "I had no idea there were so many people walking around out there doing Christopher Walken imitations. And I have to say this, Jeremy, If I'd have known about the 10,000 smackers, I'd have entered myself."

Suddenly Santa looks exhausted.

Maybe it's the light.

He walks slowly, almost painfully toward the backstage curtain, without looking back. Jeremy is concerned for the old man. He rushes ahead to help him down the few steps off stage, and guides him gently down the corridor to the backstage exit.

A stagehand helps him gingerly down the steps outside. With great sadness Jeremy and the stagehand stand at the door watching as their old hero is assisted by the driver into the back of a waiting limousine.

Inside, with the door closed, behind the darkened glass, Santa is suddenly fully invigorated.

He leans back, throws his arms up over the seatback as two lovely, elegantly dressed young women dive with great delight into the seat on either side of him.

“Well, I’d say it’s another successful little outing for the old man,” Santa declares proudly. “Let’s go have us some fun, shall we, Ladies?”

Santa gloats for a bit. “But, you gotta take it easy on me girls, I’m probably only good for another 8 or 10 hours. In return I promise I’ll hold back; we don’t want anybody getting’ hurt.”

He taps on the screen. “Gregory, take us someplace hot... and hurry. I don’t think these girls can wait and I don’t want them to cool off.”

## JANUARY 1 Afternoon

The long black limousine pulls slowly into the neighborhood where Tony lives.

Tony has his head back, his eyes closed. It's like he hasn't been gone at all. Santa says, "Before you get out, Anthony, I have a little surprise for you. I know it's a little late, but then your correspondence didn't get to me in a timely manner. Still, I could feel that your wish was heartfelt. I hope you're pleased."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," says Tony wearily.

"Well you'll see soon enough. Still, I bet it's great to get back home." Santa cracks his window a bit to take in a bushel of cold New Jersey air. "Ah! You can smell Bayonne from here." He closes the window quickly.

"If my wife doesn't hit me with a cast iron pan as soon as I walk in the door, that'll be surprise enough."

The limo pulls up opposite an empty lot between two buildings. The entire lot is a sooty jet black, making the emptiness all the more ominous. There is a bright yellow skip-loader parked next to a huge pile of burnt-out timbers and scrap wood. It is a sight of total devastation. Santa pushes a button, and Tony's window slides down to reveal this scene.

“Merry Christmas, old pal. Or maybe I should say Happy New Year.”

Tony looks. He doesn't fully understand what he's looking at. It takes him a second. Suddenly he's frantic.

“Where's my tavern? What happened here? Oh, good Christ, where's the tavern?”

“Sorry I couldn't give you the whole neighborhood, but I have to consider the wishes of others as well. But, HO-HO-HO anyway, Anthony.”

Tony sits staring out the window at the burned out lot where his business used to be. He's gutted by what he sees. Santa beaming, “Do you recall saying, *If there was a Santa Claus*, I'd ask him to burn this fuckin' tavern to the ground, and the whole miserable neighborhood along with it?”

“Yes, but I didn't mean this...”

“Well, you got your wish!”

“Yeah but...this...THIS is terrible. Mother of God. Now what? Now, what am I gonna do?”

Santa takes a piece of paper from his inside jacket pocket and begins to unfold it. It's a letter scrawled on a paper placemat. He reads royally,

“DEAR Santa, PLEASE burn this tavern to the ground. You remember writing that?”

“Yeah, but...”



*“If there was a Santa Claus, I’d ask him to burn thi...”*

“Yes, yes, yes yes yes!”

“You remember saying that?”

“Yes. I was drunk.”

“You DO remember saying that though?”

“Yeah, but,” Tony is in misery.

“Yeah but you meant it, and that’s what really counts, Anthony. I can’t be indifferent to...”

“I WAS DRUNK!” Now what am I gonna do? This is terrible! What am I gonna do?”

Tony bolts from the car and runs to the empty lot. With both hands placed on his head he leans back with his eyes toward heaven. “NOW what am I gonna do?” he bellows.

Santa comes up beside him, “You haven’t even unwrapped the gift yet.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“You’re only looking at the wrapping.”

“Get away from me. You must be insane.”

Santa sighs deeply and goes over and speaks to Gregory, who shuts the doors on the limo then gets in behind the wheel and moves the car down the street. Tony’s wife and two daughters are sitting on their stoop across the street from the burned out lot. When he turns, Tony sees them. His wife waves meekly. The little one says, “It’s Santa, Mommie!”

Gina—10 years old and bored with life, squeals with delight as she sees her father. She runs to him, “Happy New Year, Daddy!” and throws herself into his arms. He looks up sadly as his wife, with the little one by the hand, crosses the street to him.

Meanwhile Gina is saying, “The hysterical society says it was a complete lost.” She laughs giddily. “Completely lost, Daddy!”

Tony is focused on his loving wife as she approaches. The little one points at Santa, saying “Look, Mommie, it’s Santa Claus.”

“Where?”

“It’s Santa! Right there.”

The little girl runs toward Santa but stops and retreats shyly. “Hi Santa. Thanks for the Wubby.”

“Well, you’re welcome. I hope it was the right color.”

“It was.”

She runs back and clings to her mother’s legs while gazing adoringly at Santa. Tony and his wife kiss.

He pulls her into his arms and holds her tightly.

When he finally turns her loose he has tears in his eyes. He gestures helplessly toward the burned out lot.

“Did you know,” she says, “that our tavern was a way station during the Revolutionary War?”

“No, I didn’t know that. Or, maybe I did—what difference does it make now?”

“Well, I’ll tell you what difference it makes now.” She says. “Since it was an historical landmark, totally destroyed, and can not be restored to its original state... Mr. Williamson says we’re going to receive full payment.” She picks up the child in her arms. “AND, because it was a lightning strike—I don’t know why—but, he says it’s double indemnity. That’s what difference it makes.” While he ponders this news, the little one is tugging on Tony’s sleeve.

“Daddy...Daddy...”

“Yes, Sweetie..”

“Mommy’s pigment.”

“What?”

“Mommy’s pigment. She pigm...”

Santa comes up to the gathering, smiles and nods at the wife, pats both the children on the head.

“Well, congratulations, Anthony. It looks like you’re gonna be alright after all.”

“Thank you, Santa,” says the child now in her mother’s arms.

“Well, you are most welcome,” says Santa and throwing an arm around Tony’s shoulder leads him away from his family, toward the limo.

“Well, Anthony, now that you’ve torn the wrapping and gotten a little peek inside, what do you think?”

“I don’t know what to think. I don’t know what to say.”

Mockridge

“Don’t say a thing. If this ever got into the wrong hands I’d find myself out of work.”

“I’m starting to believe you’re who you say you are.”

“I never said I was anybody else.”

“Well thank you...uh, Santa.”

Tony takes Santa’s hand and shakes it vigorously.

“I do what I can.”

## THAT SAME EVENING

The limousine is passing through a familiar neighborhood. Santa rolls down the window and takes in the cold fresh air. There is a little girl on a little pink bicycle peddling waywardly up the sidewalk, followed closely by her mother.

“Slow up, Gregory. Pace Mommy. Pull up right beside them.”

“Yes, sir.” The cars pulls up smoothly beside the mother and child.

“Say, that’s a pretty nifty bicycle you got there little girl.”

Mommy cringes. She looks doubtful. She has no idea what her child is going to say to this fearful man. Santa waits.

Mommy waits. The child looks to her mommy, smiles and says, “Santy gave it to me!”

“Really? Who told you that?”

“Mommy told me. It’s for Christmas, Dummy.”

MOMMY smiles sheepishly. Watches her daughter wobble away in silence before she ambles over to the limo. She places one hand on the glass of the open window and bends to look in.

“I’m really sorry, Santa. I just...”

“That’s OK. Evelyn. You’ve always been a good kid. Say though, didn’t you have a large Santa Claus on your front lawn last time I dropped in?”

“Yeah, but somebody vandalized it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, they’d kicked it in, damaged it pretty badly. Can you imagine somebody kicking Santa Claus?”

“Actually, I can. I hope you get him up and on his feet again real soon.”

“He’ll be right back where he belongs next year for sure.”

“Well, that’ll be nice. So, see you next time, Mommy.” Santa winks as the window goes up. Evelyn is left there with mixed emotions which turn to love as she sees her child on the bike coming toward her.

Evening is arriving rapidly, and snow begins to fall in flurries.

Gregory turns to Santa and says, “I thought you didn’t like the *jolly old fat guy in the red suit*.”

“Well, I’ve changed my mind on that, Gregory. Now that I’ve experienced celebrity, I’m thinking anonymity suits me just fine.”

The limo starts out slowly down the street, lifts elegantly into the air. In the sky, it turns into the silhouette of a sleigh drawn by a team of reindeer as it disappears among the emerging stars.

People on the street strolling in the twilight shake themselves as if awakening, and continue their stroll along the sidewalk. As the child weaves in and out of this parade she shouts, “Look what Santy gave me!”

THE END

A FINAL NOTE:

An old daguerreotype was found in the rubble after the tavern burned down. It showed that same tavern with nothing else around for miles. In front of the building stands a man, with mutton chop sideburns and wearing a long apron, who looks a lot like Tony, even down to the defiance in his eye.

On one side of the building, there is a string of mules tied to a rail; on the other side, an elegant carriage with a nicely matched team of horses. Holding the halter is a man who looks quite a bit like Gregory.

And, standing beside the carriage just as if he might own the place (he doesn't), nicely dressed in the highest fashion of the period, with a top hat in one hand and a walking stick in the other, is a man who, if we look *very* closely, looks a lot like Santa Claus.