

Santa Breaks Bad

by Jodi Barnes

It was bound to happen. Even celebrities can only take so much. The constant comparisons to Christ (*people still think He was born in December*), assumptions that he was anti-Semite or anti-Islam, and accusations from PETA, now ad litem for the reindeer. His credit rating was at an all time low.

Global warming had ruined the sleigh's optimal flight patterns long before Al Gore inconvenienced much of the world. Reluctantly, Santa began to outsource in the late eighties, after the elves took early retirement in droves. Those who remained spoke of collective bargaining, which almost broke his heart.

Still, Santa made good on his promise of lifetime healthcare and a Rolex for 30 years of service, although the watches were now shipped from China under the brand *Roll-X*. Given his integrity in other matters, he didn't think the elves would mind.

But they did. His remaining helpers — a vote soon taken to switch their identity to *Master Crafters* — posted photos of Che Guevara and Norma Rae throughout the Village. They planned their own Christmas party to which he was never invited.

That was about the time things began to go south with Mrs. Claus, her fur-lined coat and spectacles abandoned for a pantsuit and contacts. By the end of the millennium, she sported Liz Claiborne jeans. Two years ago, she jammed herself into jeggings, thanks to Jenny Craig and FedEx.

She stopped making cookies in 2007.

With her latest nip-tuck, Mrs. Claus looks like the Joker. In fact, word on the Iceberg is she gets chemical peels at Joker's flagship spa. The two were recently spotted at a Lady Gaga concert in Dubai, but even Pinko, the Master Crafters' chief steward, can't bring himself to tell Santa.

Santa stands in the layaway line at TJ Maxx to pay down a \$525 billion tab. The odds of getting Christmas out of hock by the 24th are close to zero unless he dies, so he tries not to think about it. He

has little faith that Mrs. Claus would use his death benefit to pay off the layaway and hire a competent, caring successor. Last month, Blitzen suggested Kickstarter, but Santa never learned to type.

The woman in front of him drops what sounds like a coin onto the dirty floor. Santa bends down. On his way back up with a penny, he groans. The result is an audible “Ho.” He holds the penny out to her but his back isn't cooperating. He inadvertently pokes her ample bottom, unable to be anything but eye level with its jiggly girth and then her crotch as she whips around.

“What the *hell*? Oh, no you didn't!” Her bejeweled hand knocks the coin back to the floor. He manages to straighten his posture. He recognizes her from Mrs. Claus' reality TV binge, circa 2009.

“Oh, no. I didn't mean—”

“Save it, fat boy,” Snooki's laugh commands each follicle on his neck and back to stand at attention. *He's not in Jersey. Is he in Jersey? Why is he in Jersey?*

She jerks back around, whipping his rosy cheeks with deep purple hair extensions.

While he should grant her a modicum of the charity he eagerly distributes across the world — despite rumors and fears, despite the need for cultural heroes and scapegoats, despite boring husbands, militant elves, and the frustration that nobody seems to accept altruism as its own reward — he steps back and swings his big black boot into her bulbous backside.

Snooki only wobbles like those egg-shaped, bottom-heavy toys he delivered in the seventies ...*but*—he marvels—*she don't fall down!*

He grabs her baby carrier and a Neiman Marcus bag next to it without thinking.

“My stuff!” Snooki screams.

Santa runs out of line and into Housewares where he spies a butcher-block knife display. He removes the largest handle and points its blade at a woman in a shiny blue security jacket chugging toward him, a comely locomotive, puffing with purpose. Although he signals for her to stop by slicing the air, her forearm rises up and meets the blade.

He winces and changes direction, brandishing the blood-tipped knife like a charging knight. Santa is blinded by adrenaline and unwrapped rage. He looks downright giddy as he exits through the Enter Only door.

Before he hoists himself onto his sleigh, he remembers the baby carrier, looks down. It's a boy. Across his little chest: *I believe in Santa*. The letters blur. Santa wipes his eyes, gently lowers the carrier onto the sidewalk. His other hand surrenders the knife, blade tip down, to the guard who's caught up to him.

"I'm sorry about your arm," Santa says, tears again forming.

"Come on inside until the police come," she guides him with gentle hands the color of caramel.

Snooki has found her baby and is now yelling into the small gathering, "Who took my Neiman bag?"

In a former janitor's closet, the guard offers Santa her chair. He remains standing: "Please, get your arm examined. I will pay for everything."

"It's going to be okay," Carmelita says, her brown eyes brightening. She nods at a plate of macaroons, shortbread, linzer tarts and gingersnaps on her desk. "I love to bake. Help yourself."

