

Shopping Mall Santa

by Linda Hanley Finigan

The punk boys are my favorite. They come with an attitude, the piercings and the chains and the baggy pants with their underwear hanging out. I'm a punk myself, I tell them. The long white hair and beard? They're real, my friend. Picture Santa in black leather and a ponytail racing his Harley on the weekend.

I tell those punk boys, you know what you're going to do this year for coming in to see Santa? I'm going to make you one of my helpers. Yeah, okay, they nod but still with that tough guy smirk as though they're way too cool to be talking to Santa. I ask if they have any money in their pocket. They say yes. I bet you have twenty dollars in your wallet, is that right? They say they do. Okay, here's what you're going to do for Santa. I want you to take that twenty and spend five on a toy. Then I want you to drop it in the Salvation Army bin over there. Can you do that, buddy? They walk in with an attitude, but they almost always come back with a toy.

I see them waiting in line. Twelve, thirteen year-olds trying on who they are, daring each other to sit on Santa's lap. Inside, they just want to be held. They want to do the right thing. Even the punk boys. It's not the kids' fault. Look what's out there in the culture, what they deal with every day.

The things these kids ask for, though. Don't get me started. One little girl, roly-poly little barrel, you know what she asked Santa for? *Twenty-seven video games.* I said, listen, little girl, Santa brings toys; he brings dolls. No video games. She slid off my lap and burst into tears. Mall manager came over. What's the problem, Santa? *I want a video game!* the girl wails. Don't you know he probably gave her one just to stop her bawling and get her out of the mall? I told the manager, I'm sorry, dude, but even Santa has limits.

One of my elves, smart kid putting herself through college, she told me a story this year. She's maybe four or five, trying to fall asleep on Christmas Eve. All of a sudden—what does she hear? Sleigh bells! That's right. She ran to the window and there on the

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street below, what does she see but Santa Claus riding in the backseat of a taxi! To this day, she swears it happened. *I really heard sleigh bells!* Yes, I told her. I'm sure you did. Santa is real, you know. The magic is real. That's the truth.

I tell the fathers—now don't you be putting together toys and wrapping presents all Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve is for the man and woman. Christmas Day is for the child. I want you to get finished early, do your wrapping the day before. Go to bed early on Christmas Eve, you and your wife. You see what I'm saying? Santa brings love, even to the grown up boys and girls.

So when the mall finally closes, it's 6 pm, December 24th. I've been away from my wife forty nights and I'm going to get on the road and head back home to Virginia, but on the way, I always stop for the evening service at the Episcopal church. I'm still wearing my red velvet trousers, black suspenders, Santa's big chunky boots. I leave the cap and the fur-trimmed coat in the car—but look at me, even in a motorcycle jacket I'm Santa. I get some second and third looks in that cathedral, believe me.

One night years ago, I sat next to two gay men, matching bowties. This was before gay marriage, civil unions. This was in the dark days. AIDS days. Passing the peace greeting, I just gathered them both up in my arms. Skinny guys, not like Santa. I gave them a big bear hug and even though I wasn't in the mall any more, I told them Santa loved them. Those two grown men had tears in their eyes.

What else are we here for—love, right? Isn't that the reason for the season? Now Santa's no savior, and I sure as hell ain't no saint, but when I put on that red velvet costume each year, something changes. You know what I mean? You do? All right, my friend.

Go ahead. Tell me what you want for Christmas.

