



Dearly Beloved,

The season of the Santa-god draws near. I am not a blasphemer, but in our nation, Saint Nicholas, the myth, the cultural icon, the other Christmas star, approaches the status of a deity.

I tell you, I have been the Santa-god. I have walked in his shoes, and Lo, they stride long across the landscape -- long as the Shoes of the Fisherman. He is the other being of giving, of receiving graciously, of merriment and joy, of hope and peace.

For several years, I have been the Santa figure, the incarnation of the myth here amongst you; the experience infuses me with a certain awe and a degree of fear and trembling.

In New Guinea, Amazonia, and certain other remote places, tribal members paint their faces and bodies, adorn themselves with Bird of Paradise and parrot feathers, scarify their skins, and don ceremonial masks. In doing so, they don't merely represent their gods, they become the gods for purposes of ritual and ceremony.

I know what that means now.

Each December I cloak myself in the seasonal vestments, kept sacrosanct all year in an old Meier and Frank's box. A slenderish man, I safety-pin a large pillow between two undershirts. That prevents belly sag and accidents resulting from smart-alecky tomfoolery. Next comes the classic fire-engine red suit with scruffy mouton trim, smelling faintly of old spruce boughs and candy canes, with a touch of moth balls thrown in for measure. I slip on the boots, well, some type of plastic mock boot, really. Lastly, I adorn myself with Santa's signature trappings: the white beard/hair/eyebrow ensemble and jaunty cap. I sometimes scent the breath of my Santa predecessors in that old beard. I reflect that I am but one in a long line of Santa succession. I heft my Santa bag and an old dinner bell for spirit, and the game is afoot.

Now, I'm a fire engine Santa. Some guys are helicopter Santas, or Army tank Santas, or just moseying around, walking Santas. I like the impact created by a shiny red diesel V-8 fire truck, sirens bellowing and horn a-blare. That Santa arrives in style. Hark! The Herald Angels Sing! Besides, I like to ride in fire trucks. Lots of adrenalin amp. Sets the liver and lights to jumping.

The firemen chauffeur me to the staging area where we assemble for our dash to the local grade school. The fire guys offer encouragement. I couldn't do the bit without them. They soothe my jitters and promise to cover for me if a kid lunges for my beard.

The moment arrives. Sirens blaring, we halt at the school door. Inside the gymnasium is all in tumult. I grab my Santa bag, and stumble out of the truck and ho-ho a few times for luck and confidence.

Inside the door -- Roar up! Behold! the Santa-god is come! I stagger along ho-hoing to a deafening euphony of kid screams. I'm Joe Montana lurching to the goal line at Candlestick Park as the crowd roars approval.

The firemen seat me on my dias and the children begin to file by me. I greet each one, proffer a bag of treats and a few words of Christmas cheer. For a few moments, I imagine to myself that I become something pleasant to the children behind those bright eyes: a father they never knew, a memory of a beloved grandpa, an image of peace and happiness, promise for a better time to come.

In these moments, I am Santa and I am deeply moved.

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