



Bad Santa – But I Needed the Money

“THEY MUST’VE BEEN DESPERATE. SURE, YOU’VE GOT THE massive stomach and the hunched walk, you’re red-faced and enjoy the company of little elves, but I thought they normally gave the job to some old codger with two feet in the grave,” a mate of mine said over a coldie.

They were desperate? Fair dinkum – I’m sure it was *me* who was desperate. Against all odds, I’d scored a job as King of the Kiddies – Santa Claus; Father Christmas; good old St Nick; whatever. Must have marshmallows for a brain, my friends thought.

I did not disagree one iota. Who in his right mind would sit in a big shopping centre in the middle of summer; wearing a ridiculously outdated, red-and-white, woollen costume with a fake beard and a pillow stuffed down his shirt to make it look like he had a mega-normous gut; balancing impatient, obnoxious, snotty-nosed kiddies on his knee; many of whom were experiencing varying degrees of incontinence, and who were only there to scam lollies and balloons; or because their mother wanted some anonymous stranger to lay down the law about them lifting their game at home, otherwise they’d get no Chrissie presents? Geez – I’m bloody glad I’ve got that out of my system. Fill up my glass again, thanks very much!

But the mercenary in me accepted the job “because I needed the money”. I believe Bambi Woods said exactly that when she appeared as the title character in *Debbie Does Dallas*. However, that’s where the similarities end between the delicious Bambi/Debbie and my good self. And unlike the aforementioned lass, I wasn’t thrown straight into the deep end.

Aspiring Santas were required to attend Santa Training School, where we were told the do’s and don’ts, the wills and won’ts, of the caper.

“Never promise a child anything; keep him or her in a state of anticipation.”

“Don’t be gung-ho and go ho-ho-ho because it scares babies and upsets old people’s pacemakers.”

“Don’t go to the pub at lunchtime because the beer fumes will waft out through Santa’s beard and knock the children out.”

“Focus on the young girls and their beautiful smiles, not their mothers’ tight jeans and seductive wiles.”

“If a child wants a new brother or sister, say that’s not Santa’s department – he only makes the toys, not the babies.”

All of these training school directives would’ve deterred even Billy Bob Thornton’s *Bad Santa* from taking on the job – but not me. You guessed it – I needed the money. And we were also warned that there really were young hooligans out there who’d say: “Hey, Santa Claus you c***, where’s my f*****g bike?”, in reference to Kevin “Bloody” Wilson’s iconic song.

Apart from wearing the cumbersome Santa costume, which was like donning a suit of armour to face the 1980s’ West Indies’ fast-bowling attack at its keenest, leanest and meanest, the most difficult thing about the job was remembering the names of those friggin’ reindeers. I knew Rudolph was the red-nosed one – that’s easy, the same as Santa – but the names of the other eight escaped me. Perhaps Dasher was Flasher and Cupid was Stupid. Maybe Comet was Gromet and Dancer was Romancer. Who knows? Who cares? Somehow I

absorbed enough Santa-talk to get the job and not the sack (ho-ho-ho!).

The preliminaries dispensed with, I “flew” down from the “North Pole” in my beaten-up old Holden, as Santa does, to some nondescript Canberra shopping centre to begin my official career as Mr S. Claus. Before that my last acting role had been in a primary school production of Banjo Paterson’s *The Man from Ironbark*, in which I’d been cast as the gilded (did Banjo mean gelded?) youth who incurred the wrath of the lead character. But back to Santa – I initially felt like I was on show at the zoo, or starring as Captain Novelty Head at the local freak show. I soon got into the groove and warmed to most, but certainly not all, kiddies.

Being the confused old rascal he is, Santa has long since forgotten most kids’ requests, but some of the more popular – and I’m going back a good few Christmases here – were Batman costumes, BMX bikes, Cabbage Patch Kids, GI Joes, Mighty Morphin Power Rangers and rollerblades. Whatever happened to good old-fashioned cricket bats and footballs?

But it was the bizarre requests that amused me most. A few young lads, clearly influenced by Dad sitting through boozy, all-night sporting marathons, asked for beer. Santa could relate to that. A pretty young girl, instead of a pristine Barbie doll, wanted a filthy, dirty, mud-splattered pig. Santa could definitely relate to that. And a young fella, no older than five, requested the stunning lass who worked in the newsagency 20 metres away. Hey – Santa saw her first!

And some kiddies could be brutally honest. Many would gaze into Santa’s eyes and ask: “Are you real?”

“Of course I am, you cheeky little bastard,” I thought. But I couldn’t say that – could I?

“Oh yes,” I’d reply with masked enthusiasm.

“How come there’s another Santa in Big W?”

“He’s just one of Santa’s helpers,” I replied, (mistle)-toeing

the (Christmas) Party line.

“That’s what he said about you.”

Umm ... you got me there.

But not all children could differentiate between the squad of Santas doing the rounds. One girl boldly strolled up and plonked herself on my knee.

“How are you today, Santa?” she asked.

“Very well thanks, my dear. And what would you like for Christmas?”

“I told you yesterday, you silly old fool! A Madonna CD, a new bike and a purple swimsuit.”

If Santa has his way, you ain’t gettin’ nothin’, sweetheart. She’d obviously put her order in with Santa – but definitely *not* this Santa!

When my “Santaty” could no longer tolerate the unruly demands of frustrated capitalists and prima donnas still dirty on the jolly red giant for what he “forgot” to bring them last year, I’d go for a wander. It wouldn’t be stretching the truth to say this particular Santa was a bit of a scallywag, who quickly realised that some of the young ladies now putting their orders in would be more than welcome to make an all-expenses-paid trip to the North Pole 15 to 20 years down the track (“Are you with me?”, as Sir Les Patterson would say). But for now, Santa yearned for requests from more mature ladies.

“Hop on my knee and let’s talk about the first thing that pops up” was a line they *didn’t* teach us at Santa School, but one I’d been itching to use. So off I’d go seeking opportunities to use it (the line that is). Hairdressing salons were always fair game. Not for a beard trim – that would be sacrilegious – but because hairdressers are generally cheeky-and-chirpy types. And very pleasing on the eye, I might add. One particular trio gave me more cheek ’n’ chirp than most.

“Hey, Santa, what do you really look like?” asked very tidy brunette Steph.

“You mean you want me to ditch the costume and reveal all?” I replied, optimistically.

“You’re bloody hopeful; just give us a butcher’s hook at your face. Sonia here reckons you’re a bit of a spunk-rat.” Raven-haired beauty Lisa having her two bob’s worth.

“Santa’s like the Phantom; his true identity must forever remain a secret,” I said, again toeing the old Party line.

“C’mon, Santa, be a good sport. Pull the beard down.” Sonia a drop-dead-gorgeous blonde this time.

You’re kidding, aren’t you, girls? I’d refer any person straight to an optometrist if he/she thought me revealing my true self would result in a flood of offers to grace the front cover and/or centre-fold of glossy women’s magazines. By the same token, I didn’t think I had a head like an erupting boil, despite what a number of my mates – all of them, actually – said. Down came the beard.

“On second thoughts, pull it back up, mate.” Lisa, Steph and Sonia together.

“Ah well, ladies, too bad about the Porsches I planned on making for each of you.”

Maybe my mates were right. The “scissor sisters” were good sports (though not good judges of appearance) and gave me a bottle of bubbly, albeit of very dubious quality, when I visited the next day. I thanked them and suggested that if they popped up to the North Pole, all their Christmases would come at once. The girls’ forced laughter suggested that I needed to rewrite my lines and had perhaps overstayed my welcome.

Having all these young ’uns queuing up to see me – and hair-dressers “harassing” me – was a real ego boost, but at the end of the day it was a bloody relief to pack up the “sleigh” and return to the North Pole.

“Where are you going, Santa?” the kiddies would ask.

“To the North Pole.”

“What are you going to do up at the North Pole, Santa?”

“Well, first I’ll give the reindeers a drink, then ...”

“Then make the toys, Santa? Can we come with you?”

“Sorry, but the reindeers are battling to carry me, let alone you lot. And Mrs Claus and the elves are scared of strangers. Maybe next year ...”

The truth be known, I was going to give myself a drink – a frosty-cold ale that I could only dream about while I sweltered and melted as some mother tried to coax her Claustrophobic son into sitting still for a photo that he had absolutely no interest in being in. Rudolph and the boys could please themselves with what they drank, just as long as they got me home in one piece. Dear old Mrs Claus was permanently on the bottle. And the elves – just knocking the top off a beer would knock them out. But for me, that first beer never touched the sides.

Occasionally while performing my Clark Kent transformation back to normality, in my haste to have that first beer, I forgot to remove my white eyebrow make-up. Walking through the shopping centre, I received strange looks from kiddies who’d seen *those* eyebrows before, but couldn’t quite place them. The occasional parent could, though, and would say: “G’day, Santa – you’re not the crusty old fart I imagined.”

At times, it was difficult to switch out of Santa-mode. Once, while walking to my car, I said: “How’re you, gorgeous?” to this octogenarian woman I’d flirted with barely half an hour earlier. Having never seen the real me before and fully aware her “gorgeous days” were a good many Christmases ago, she correctly concluded I was a complete-and-absolute nutter in urgent need of psychological help. Perhaps I was in need of help – not just then, but the moment I accepted the Santa Claus job. But maybe I just needed the money ...