

The Santa Fix

by Bill McCurry

Kids are like locusts with sticky fingers, Max thought as he stabbed the 9th floor button with his thumb. He slumped against the empty elevator's back wall with his arms crossed and reflected that next Christmas break he'd try for a temp job at the nursery selling pine trees. If his choice was between chainsaws and six-year olds, he'd take chainsaws next time.

Max scratched under the polyester beard and then un-wedged the red felt trousers from his crotch. He spotted a dwarfish pink splash as it whirled around the corner of the cologne display, 30 feet down the aisle from the elevator. Max growled as he identified the creature as a little girl, about four years old, box of Junior Mints in hand. She probably wanted to talk about mermaids and unicorns and crap for five minutes, and that was five minutes of coffee and hot food that Max would never get back.

Max darted aside, out of view, but he reacted like a lazy bunny compared to the girl, who responded like a voracious hawk. "Santa!" she shrieked, and Max expected to hear cologne bottles shattering up and down the aisle.

Max speared the "close door" button, but the elevator doors continued to gape at the first floor aisle. The slapping of the girl's little sneakers bounced louder off the elevator's back wall, Max imagined some stupid, glittery fairies on those sneakers as he began hitting the "close door" button like a trip-hammer. Then the doors produced a soft, lovely grind and slipped towards one another.

“Santa! Stop!” the little girl said, and Max saw her pink hand thrust between the closing doors. But some conscientious parent on the other side yanked the girl back, and Max leaned against the wall with a smirk.

At the 2nd floor the bell rang, and the elevator eased to a halt. Max stood up and straightened his beard. Max’s boss had pounded him about the “always in character when the kids can see you” junk. Max wanted to jump out the widow after 10 days of this saccharine garbage, but Max was a student and needed the money like a tick needed blood.

The steel doors retracted, and a pleasantly fleshy woman smiled at Max as she entered. He figured she was about his older sister’s age, and she walked through the doors pulling a child by the hand. Max glanced at the child and classified it with zoological precision: *boy, age 6, silent, staring, no smile, no snot on face, no potential weapons, handler is present—assessment: benign*. Max smiled back at the woman, who was pressing the 8th floor button, and then Max smiled down at the boy. The boy looked at Max with large eyes.

As the doors glided shut Max looked directly forward and hoped that they would all observe the social fiction of elevators. In an elevator strangers don’t exist as long as you don’t look at them. And if you keep your voice moderately low, they can’t hear your conversations. And even if the elevator is packed and your elbow’s forced into the breast of the woman next to you, you can pretend you’re not really touching at all as long as you both keep staring straight ahead.

The boy must have understood nothing about these rules. He looked up at Max, fiddled with the pockets of his Iron Man hoodie, and mumbled, “Hi, Santa.”

Max knew he was busted. He glanced up to see they hadn’t yet hit the 4th floor, and then he smiled down at the kid. Actually, Max didn’t

mind the Ho-Ho part too much, and that ought to keep them occupied even until the 8th floor.

“Ho ho ho!” Max boomed, startling himself in the elevator’s tiny space. The kid flinched, and Max toned it down a bit. “Merry Christmas, son.” Max’s mind grasped for another bit of Santa small talk. “Have you been a good boy this year?”

The kid looked down and squirmed, clearly embarrassed. But he answered with a barely audible, “Yes.”

Max suppressed a grin as the conversation slid into the predictable track. He went on in a friendly rumble, “I just knew you’d been a good boy.”

The kid looked up at Max and said, “I knew that you knew, Santa. I already told you this morning. Did you forget?”

Max’s mouth dropped half-way open, and he stared at the boy. The kid didn’t look at all familiar, but a jillion kids had slid across Max’s knees that morning. How could he remember any one of them? He licked his lips.

“We saw Santa at the mall this morning, not here, remember honey?” the woman jumped in, patting the kid on the shoulder and looking Max in the eye with an apology.

“So?” the boy went on, undeterred.

Sweat leapt out on Max’s forehead, right under the brim of his Santa hat. He said the first stupid thing that popped out of his mouth, “I know you knew that I knew. I was just testing to see if you knew that I know!”

The kid cocked his head at Max. Max glanced up and saw that the mother had cocked her head at him as well. Max realized he was going down in flames. He followed up with an anemic, “Ho ho ho...”

The boy turned away from Max and clung to the leg of the woman's stylish, tweed pants suit. Max corrected himself—he was going down in nitro-fueled flames to crash into a gasoline refinery built on top of a radioactive waste dump. Unemployment loomed in Max's imagination, followed by the inability to buy books for the next semester, trailed rapidly by starvation and death.

Think, think, think, dummy! How do I know kids have been good? Mind their parents? Eat their vegetables? Feed the dog? Clean their room?

Max released a quiet sigh and said, "I know that you've been good this year. You told me all about it." Max closed his eyes. "You told me about how you always clean your room!"

Max opened his eyes to see the kid whip around and beam him a huge smile as he screeched, "That's right!"

Max smiled. The mother smiled. The kid kept smiling. It was a smile-fest.

Until a grating clang jarred them, and the elevator compartment jerked to a halt. Then it became an eyeballs flying wide open-fest.

The woman and Max stared at one another, the kid forgotten. Max looked up at the floor indicator and saw a faint glow from the 8. The elevator was of the type that provides a complete set of buttons on each side of the doors. This was handy because both Max and the woman fell into a frenzy of pushing every possible button, most of them multiple times, and they were able to do so without getting in one another's way. After perhaps 10 seconds of this, Max looked at the woman and said, "I think we're stuck." The woman rolled her eyes and looked away.

"Santa," the boy spoke up, "can't you just get us out like you do when you go up a chimney?"

Max froze. A decision loomed before him. Did he break character in this emergency, or did he remain in his Santa Claus persona like a complete dork? He looked at the kid, who gazed back up at him with utter confidence. With the little boy's devotion to Santa hovering in his mind, Max thought, *Come on! We're stuck in an elevator! Who gives a flip?*

Then Max threw on a mental brake and thought, *Wait—everybody in the store will hear about this. If I pull this off I'll look like a hero. Maybe I'll get a bonus.*

"Well?" came the woman's exasperated voice, colored with a wash of fear. "You work here. Do something!"

Max forced a smile and explained, "This elevator is a lot bigger than a chimney. I need to call in some help." The kid looked confused. The woman looked irritated and confused. Max weakly amended, "From the elves. I need to call the elves to come help us out."

Understanding bloomed in the kid's face, and the mother sighed but shrugged at Max in acknowledgement of his lame brain attempt to keep up the façade. *It worked!* Max thought. *I can't believe that it worked! Kids must watch too many cartoons. They'll believe anything!*

Max fished his cell phone out of his pocket and flipped it open. Then he sagged. "No bars. No signal at all," he explained.

The woman whipped out a cell phone faster than Bill Hickok could pull a pistol. Within moments she too admitted that no signal reached her phone.

Max looked around and spied the compartment low on the panel that held the emergency phone. Before the kid could ask why Santa didn't make cell signals pass through steel or why he couldn't pull a

teleporter out of his ear, Max opened the panel and triumphantly produced the red emergency phone.

As Max pressed the earpiece to his ear it began buzzing. He waited in silence while it buzzed three times. At the fourth buzz he glanced over at the woman and smiled. She did not smile back. At the seventh buzz Max stopped smiling too. At the tenth buzz Max realized that his right foot was tapping like a Geiger counter, and he willed it into immobility. Somewhere before the fifteenth buzz Max's head had dropped, dangling below his shoulders like an ox in Death Valley. He glanced up and realized that the woman would happily beat him to death if only she had something heavier than lingerie in her shopping bag. But a glance at the boy showed nothing but beatific confidence on his face.

Just after the seventeenth buzz a concerned voice in the earpiece answered, "Hello?"

"What the h—" Max erupted, and then he calmed himself as he looked at the kid from the corner of his eye. Max went on, "I'm calling from the elevator, and there's a problem. We're stuck at the 8th floor."

"Who is this calling?" the voice inquired, having dropped into a calm and businesslike tone.

Max paused, aware that the boy was soaking in every word. "This is Santa Claus," he managed to reply without grimacing.

The earpiece fell quiet for a nerve-twisting five seconds. Then laughter exploded in Max's ear, followed by, "Jacob, is this you? Did Suzie put you up to this?"

"No, this is Santa Claus," Max explained. "I'm stuck in the elevator with some shoppers."

The laughter died. “Hey man, those phones are for emergency use only. Making a prank call on those phones is a criminal act. Now get off the phone before we come up there and hand you over to the cops.”

“Wait! Wait!” Max cried. “I’ve got a nice little boy and his mother in the elevator with me, and this is *Santa Claus* headed to the 9th floor to talk to all the folks who work here while they eat lunch. Do you understand?”

Several more seconds of silence spilled from the earpiece before the voice replied, “Okay, yeah. I get it.”

“Good!” Max sighed, smiling at the boy, who grinned back at him. The woman’s face unfolded in relief. *She must have thought we were going to have to eat each other to survive in here*, Max absently speculated as he turned his attention back to the phone. “Now that I’ve gotten in touch with you, *my elves*, please come on up and help me unstick the elevator.”

The voice replied, “Okay man, no sweat. Which elevator are you in?”

“I’m in the one that’s stuck, you dimwit!” Max yelled, then he glanced over at the boy with an embarrassed look of apology.

“Not very big on the Christmas spirit, are you, Santa? You might get a big old load of coal in your sock this year. Or in your pay envelope,” the voice sniffed. Then it chuckled, “Aw, I’m just kidding you! Hang tight and we’ll get you going soon.”

“Okay, thanks,” Max said. Then he added, “Um, thanks Sparky. And say thanks to the other elves for me.”

The voice in the earpiece laughed again and departed with a click.

Max replaced the phone and threw the kid and his mom his best *Santa's coming to town with puppies and flat screen TVs* smile. The woman smiled back and quietly said, "Thank you."

The boy exclaimed, "That elf sounded like a moron. What do you do with moron elves? Do you fire them? What other kinds of jobs can elves do? The elves you've fired. If they can't get a job, do polar bears eat them? Do you eat lunch with the people who work here? Do you give them presents? Do you eat anything besides milk and cookies? I like Hot Pockets. Do you like Hot Pockets? And why is that elf named Sparky? Isn't Sparky a weird name for an elf?"

During this torrent Max had stared at the kid with dense stupidity. When the kid paused to take a breath, his mother jumped in. "Honey, Santa's got a lot of work to do now. Don't pester him with all these questions." Max looked at her with profound gratitude. Had things been different he might have married her on the spot.

"But Santa can do anything!" the boy proclaimed with just a hint of a pout in his voice.

Max cleared his throat and accepted that he wasn't making a clean getaway. He said, "You'd be surprised how many elves are named Sparky. In fact, it's the most common elf name at the North Pole."

"I have the most common name too," the boy said proudly.

"Sparky...?" Max stammered.

"No!" the kid corrected Max forcefully. "Most common around here! But you know that, 'cause you already know my name." He looked up at Max expectantly.

Holy frijoles! Max fumed to himself. *Busted twice on the same thing! 'Santa' saw the kid this morning, so I've got to know his name!*

Max's brain flailed like a salmon in an Alaskan stream, but he was devoured by the twin grizzly bears of ignorance and panic.

"That's right, John," the mother told the kid with a pat on the shoulder, "You have a beautiful name."

God bless that woman! Max thought. The boy was looking up at her, and Max took that moment to mouth the words, *Thank you*, towards her.

"John is a great name," Max agreed as John looked back up at him. "Maybe my next reindeer will be named John." The kid giggled, and Max went on, "Do you know any reindeer around here named John?" *Hey, that was pretty good!* Max exulted internally. *I made the kid laugh.*

"No," John answered with another giggle. "There aren't any reindeer here." Then John pulled a serious face and asked, "What do reindeer look like?"

Hah! Easy! Max thought. "They look like deer." Max paused and realized that he had no idea how a reindeer might look different from any other deer. John gazed at him with genuine curiosity. Max continued, "With horns... um, antlers. And tails. And you can put reins on them so they can pull a sleigh... my sleigh, that is." Max paused again, thinking hard. "And one of them has a red nose." John's expression remained the same, and Max realized that he hadn't yet cleared the hurdle of reverent belief that existed in the boy. He glanced at the mother, who was pointedly looking away. Max took a deep breath, looked up at the ceiling, and then inspiration hit him. "And they can fly!" he announced. John nodded with satisfaction.

Max realized that this was like flying down the trench on the Death Star—and he was probably just one of those guys in a star fighter who gets blown away early. Maybe even the fat guy. It was just a matter of time. Max looked at John with a big smile, hoping that the sheer

mythological presence of Santa Claus would keep the kid in awe until the elevator was fixed.

“Santa, how do you get in my house?” John asked. “We don’t have a chimney. How do you get in?”

Max could feel his pulse rising. This was crazy. He thought he might hyperventilate or throw up. “Um, I come in through the back door.”

John shoved his hands in his pockets. “But we have an alarm. I’m not supposed to open the door when the red light’s on. You’d set off the alarm.”

“I... know the code,” Max explained. “I know all the codes. I know all the codes everywhere. I can open all the locks and doors and windows in the whole world,” he said, hoping that he had covered himself. Max looked at John for a pregnant moment and then he shrieked, “Except for elevator doors!”

“Oh,” John said as he considered that information.

“Santa?” John asked quietly a few seconds later.

Max curdled inside, but he maintained his jolly exterior. “Yes, John?”

“About what I told you this morning when you asked what I wanted for Christmas...”

Max glanced up at the woman for guidance, but she merely shrugged and shook her head. He’d have to wing this.

Max was used to having the *what-do-you-want-for-Christmas* conversation at kid-level, and there was no way the kid could sit on Max’s knee here in the elevator. It seemed weird to tower over the boy.

Max knelt so he was at John's height and replied with a confidence that he absolutely did not possess, "What about it?"

John looked Max in the eye and said, "You know what I said I wanted?"

Max paused a moment, resigned himself to failure, and replied, "No John, I don't know what you want for Christmas."

"Yeah, that's because I couldn't decide this morning," John agreed. Max somehow managed to prevent his eyes from popping open in a manner unbecoming to a jolly old elf. "But I think I'm ready to decide now."

"All right then," Max said, all business now. He was pretty confident about how this part worked. "What do you want for Christmas, John?"

"I was thinking maybe a computer," John mused. Max looked up at John's mom, part of the standard procedure when a kid asks for something big. His mom shook her head at Max in a violent *No*.

"A computer is a very big gift, John," Max began. "It might take two years—"

"But I don't want a computer," John interrupted. "Then I was thinking that I'd like a race car set."

The woman smiled at that one. "That's a wonderful gift!" Max smiled. "You've certainly been a good boy, and that—"

John cut Max off again, "But that's not what I want either." John looked hard into Max's eyes again and continued, "I want... a dog!"

Per standard procedure, Max glanced up at mom. Mom's head shook like it was mixing a pitcher of pomegranate martinis. Max looked

back at John and said, “A dog is a really big responsibility, John. Are you ready to take care of a dog?”

As the words left his mouth, Max metaphorically slammed his forehead into the wall. *Of course he'll say that he's ready to take care of a dog, dummy!* But Max looked steadily at the boy.

“I’ll take care of him,” John assured the internally flailing Max. “I’ll feed him and walk him. I’ll teach him tricks.”

Max regrouped. “I know you will, John, but it will be easier when you’re a little older. How about that race car set?”

John set his jaw and said, “I don’t want the race cars. I want a dog!”

Max searched for inspiration, and then he said, “I know you want a dog, but maybe the right dog, the perfect dog for you, won’t be ready for you for a couple of years. He might not be born yet.” *Ooh, that was smooth*, Max thought.

John looked a little uncertain as he said, “I want a dog for Christmas. My dog died, and I want a dog for Christmas. That’s all I want.”

Max’s brain reeled to a halt. He swallowed and looked up at John’s mom. Her brow sat low on her face. That did not look promising.

Without looking away from the woman Max asked John, “What was your dog’s name?”

“Tozo,” John said.

“What kind of dog was he?”

“Brown,” John answered.

“And if you get another dog you’ll take care of it?” Max asked, still looking at the disapproving mother.

“I will,” John assured him.

“And if you could have another dog, what kind would you want?”

“Brown,” John said. “And smart. I want to play with him. He can sleep in my bed. He doesn’t need a bed.”

Max raised his eyebrows at John’s mom. She looked like she might be wavering, so he twisted the knife. “Why do you want a dog for Christmas, John?”

“I miss my dog. He’s dead. I don’t want him to be dead,” John replied in a matter of fact way.

Max paused, waiting for the woman to crumble. He knew that *he* had certainly crumbled a bit, and although he’d never admit it to his friends at school there might be a tear or two in his eyes. John’s mother sighed and nodded at Max.

“Okay, John. One brown dog for Christmas it is! But you have to take care of him and not expect your mom to do it for you,” Max warned.

John gave Max a huge smile and then turned that smile on his mother. She smiled back down at him.

As John was saying, “Thank you, Santa,” the elevator car jerked and clanked once again. All three of them looked expectantly at the doors as if they might open onto the Pearly Gates rather than onto the 8th floor garden tools department. The doors slid open, and yes... lawnmowers and weed eaters greeted them. Suzie the security guard and a couple of maintenance guys greeted them as well.

“Come on out, folks,” Suzie encouraged them. “Sorry about the inconvenience, ma’am. Sorry about that, Santa,” she said to Max with a wink. “Is everybody okay?”

Max and the woman assured Suzie that they were all fine. John's mom led him away from the elevator, and Max followed. "Ho ho ho!" Max boomed. "Merry Christmas, John. You keep on being a good boy this year, all right?"

"Okay!" John cried. Then he pulled his mom's arm and whispered something to her. She released his hand, and he ran to Max, holding his arms up for a hug.

As Max reached down in return, John whispered to him, "You're a great Santa! I like you. You hardly messed up at all!"

Max flinched and looked into John's upturned face. "What..." he sputtered.

"I know that Santa's not real," John explained in a whisper. "Don't tell my mom—she doesn't know."

Max resisted the urge to grasp John's arms a lot harder than was Santa-appropriate. "You little *creep!*" Max hissed. "Why did you run me through this carnival of crap?" he demanded, still whispering.

"Just wanted to see how you'd do," John smiled up at him. "That was fun. Didn't you have fun?"

"No! I did not have fun!" Max's voice rose above a whisper, and John's mom looked over with slight concern.

"Oh. Sorry about that," John murmured. Then he chirped, "But thanks, Santa! You're great!" He scampered back towards his mother. Max stared after him. Rage, frustration, fatigue, relief, and a little elation chased one another inside him like dogs with sausages tied to their tails.

Halfway to his mother, John turned and called back to Max, "Hey, I meant it about the dog."

Max suppressed a semi-hysterical laugh and replied, “Yeah, me too.”

John waved once more and ran on to his mother, who grasped his hand and led him around a display of fertilizer and out of sight.

Max turned to the other elevator, the one without an *Out of Order* sign taped to it. This elevator had just halted on its upwards journey to the 9th floor, the cafeteria, and Max’s spinach and mushroom Panini. Its doors stood open. Max wandered into the elevator like the survivor of a particularly vicious shelling, and he faced the doors. As those doors slid closed he produced a wry grin and murmured, “Merry, merry...”