

BY  
DAVID  
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# Santaland Diaries



Editor's Note: David Sedaris is a New York City writer, radio commentator and house cleaner. The piece that follows, which evolved from Sedaris's actual diary entries, was read originally on "Morning Edition," a National Public Radio broadcast. Sedaris is the author of the recently published *Barrel Fever*, a book of essays and short fiction.

## October 24

I was in a coffee shop reading the want ads when I read, "Macy's Herald Square, the largest store in the world, has big opportunities for out-going, fun-loving people of all shapes and sizes who want more than just a holiday job! Working as an elf in Macy's SantaLand means being at the center of the excitement!"

I brought the ad home and Rusty and I were laughing about it and he dared me to call for an interview. So I did. The woman at Macy's said, "Would you be interested in full-time elf or evening-and-weekend elf?"

I said full-time elf.

I have an appointment next Wednesday at noon. I am a thirty-three-year-old man applying for a job as an elf.

## October 29

I am trying to look on the bright side. I have to admit that I had high hopes when I moved to New York City. In my imagination I was going to go straight from Penn Station to the offices of *One Life to Live*. In my imagination I'd go out for drinks with Cord Roberts and Victoria Buchanan, the show's biggest stars. We'd sit in a plush booth at a tony cocktail lounge and they'd lift their frosty glasses in my direction and say,

"A toast to David Sedaris! The best writer this show has ever had!"

I'd say, "You guys, cut it out."

People at the surrounding tables would stare at us, whispering, "Isn't that . . . ? Isn't that . . . ?"

I might be distracted by their enthusiasm and Victoria Buchanan would lay her hand over mine and tell me that I'd better get used to being the center of attention.

But instead I am applying for a job as an elf.

Instead someone will say, "What's that shoe size again?" and hand me a pair of 7 1/2 slippers, the toes of which curl to a point.

## October 31

A week ago I laughed myself silly over Macy's "Elf Wanted" ad; this afternoon I sat in the SantaLand office and was told, "Congratulations, Mr. Sedaris; you're an elf."

In order to become an elf I had to fill out ten pages of forms, take a multiple-choice personality test, undergo two interviews, and submit urine for a drug test. The first interview was general, designed to eliminate the obvious sociopaths. During the second interview we were asked why we wanted to be elves, which, when you think about it, is a fairly tough question. When the

woman next to me, a former waitress in her late twenties, answered, she put question marks after everything she said. "I really want to be an elf? Because I think it's really about acting? And before this I worked in a restaurant? Which was owned by this really wonderful woman who had a dream to open a restaurant? And it made me think that it's like, really, really important? To have a dream?"

I told the interviewers that I wanted to be an elf because it was the most ridiculous thing I had ever heard of. I figured that for once in my life I would be completely honest and see how far it got me. But they hired me anyway. Honesty had nothing to do with it. They hired me because I am five feet five inches tall.

## November 19

Today we began our elf training. We learned the name of the various elf positions. You can be, for example, an "Oh, My God!" elf and stand at the corner near the escalator. People arrive, see the long line around the corner, and say, "Oh, My God!"; your job is to tell them that it won't take more than an hour to see Santa.

You can be an Entrance Elf, a Water-cooler Elf, a Bridge Elf, Train Elf, Maze Elf, Island Elf, Magic-Window Elf, Emergency-Exit Elf, Counter Elf, Magic-Tree Elf, Pointer Elf, Santa Elf, Photo Elf, Usher Elf, Cash-Register Elf, or Exit Elf. We were given a demonstration of the various positions, acted out by returning elves who were so "on stage" and goofy that it made me a little sick to my stomach. I don't know that I could look anyone in the eye and exclaim, "Oh, my goodness, I think I see Santa!" or, "Can you close your eyes and make a very special Christmas wish!" It makes one's mouth hurt to speak with such forced merriment. It embarrasses me to hear people talk this way. I prefer being frank with children. I'm more likely to say, "You must be exhausted" or, "I know a lot of people who would kill for that little waistline of yours."

I am afraid I won't be able to provide the enthusiasm Santa is asking for. I think I'll be a low-key sort of elf.

## November 21

My costume is green. I wear green velvet knickers, a yellow turtleneck, a forest-green velvet smock, and a perky lit-

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tle hat decorated with spangles. This is my work uniform.

Today was elf dress rehearsal. I worked as a Santa Elf for house number two. A Santa Elf greets children at the Magic Tree and leads them to Santa's house. When you work as a Santa Elf you have to go by your elf name. My elf name is Crumpet. The other Santa elves have names like Jingle and Frosty. They take the children by the hand and squeal with forced delight. They sing and prance and behave like cartoon characters come to life. They frighten me.

## 🎄 November 29

Two members of the Macy's stable of Santas are black. Both are so light-skinned that, with the beard and makeup, you'd never know they weren't white. Yesterday a black woman who requested a "Santa of color" got upset after she was sent to Jerome.

"He's not black," the woman said.

The floor manager assured the woman that, yes, he was black. The woman said, "Well, he isn't black enough."

Jerome is a difficult Santa, moody and unpredictable. He spends a lot of time staring off into space. When a boss tells Jerome that we need to speed things up, Jerome gets defensive and says, "Listen, I'm playing a *role* here. Do you understand? A dramatic role that takes a great deal of preparation."

I've overheard Jerome encouraging children to enter the field of entomology. He says, "Entomology. Do you know what that is? He tells them that the defensive spray of the stinkbug may have medicinal powers that may one day cure mankind of communicable diseases. He says, "Do you know what a communicable disease is?" That's an odd question, especially coming from Santa.

I was the Pointer Elf this afternoon. A woman approached me and whispered, "We would like a *traditional* Santa. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about." I sent her to Jerome.

## 🎄 December 9

A child came up to Santa this morning

and his mother said, "All right, Jason. Tell Santa what you want."

Jason said, "I... want... Procter and... Gamble to... stop animal testing."

The mother said, "Procter, Jason, that's Procter and Gamble. And what do they do to animals? Do they torture animals, Jason? Is that what they do?"

Jason said, yes, they torture. He was maybe six years old.

Karen Kuehn



THE AUTHOR, DAVID SEDARIS, SANS COSTUME.

## 🎄 December 11

We were packed today, absolutely packed, and everyone was cranky. Once the line gets long we break it up into four different lines because no one in their right mind would stay if they knew it would take over two hours to see Santa. You can see a *movie* in two hours. Standing in a two-hour line makes people worry that they're not living in a democratic nation. They go over the edge. I was sent into the hallway to direct the second phase of the line. The hallway was packed with people and all of them seemed to stop me with a question: Which way to the down escalator, which way to the ele-

vator, the Patio Restaurant, gift wrap, the women's rest room, Trim-a-Tree. There was a line for Santa and a line for the women's bathroom, and one woman, after asking me a thousand questions already, asked, "Which is the line for the women's bathroom?" I shouted that I thought it was the line with all the *women* in it.

She said, "I'm going to have you fired."

I had two people say that to me today: "I'm going to have you fired." Go ahead, be my guest. I'm wearing a green velvet costume. It doesn't get any worse than this. Who do these people think they are? I want to lean over and say, "I'm going to have you *killed*."

## 🎄 December 22

This afternoon I was stuck being Photo Elf with Santa Santa. I don't know his real name. No one does. During most days there is a slow period when you sit around the house and talk to your Santa. Most of them are nice guys and we sit around and laugh, but Santa Santa takes himself a bit too seriously. I asked him where he lived and he said, "Why, I live at the North Pole with Mrs. Claus!" I asked what he does the rest of the year and he said, "I make toys for all of the children!"

I said, "Yes, but what do you do for money?"

"Santa doesn't need money," he said.

Santa Santa sits and waves and jingles his bell sash when no one is there. He actually recited "The Night Before Christmas" and it was just the two of us in the house. No children, just us. What do you do with a nut like that?

## a closer look

1. How does the reality of Sedaris's life in New York City differ from his fantasies about it?
2. How does the author use irony for comic effect?
3. Why does the author think that "Santa Santa" is a nut? Is he? What's wrong with his taking his job seriously?