

Santa's Grotto

"Cor, here's some mugs already, chums!" said Daddy Bear. "Let's get started then. There's money to be made here. Now, does my beard look all right?"

"Oh stop worrying! You know it does! Just like a real Santa, I should say." Mummy Bear made some minor adjustments to Daddy Bear's huge false beard and set his red hat at a more sedate angle. "Now, Baby Bear, get into position and let's see how much money we can make today..."

Mummy Bear then opened the door of Santa's Grotto and beamed at the impatient queue forming outside. "Santa will be with you in just a moment, my dears!" she called gaily, "He's just parking his reindeer safely on the roof!"

Santa's Grotto was a somewhat shaky-looking construction in the corner of Patrick Thompson's department-store, with false snow piled high on its roof and some unhappy false robins stuck here and there. On the floor outside the grotto, drifts of white polystyrene snow squeaked underfoot.

It was Christmas.

"Now, who is going to be the first to visit Santa? This little girl here? Come along then." Mummy Bear held up her paw sternly. "Sorry, madam - mums and dads stay outside. Strict orders from Santa. Thank you"

The little girl walked cautiously into the grotto and saw a huge Santa enthroned before her. The Santa growled and then chuckled in a very deep voice.

"Ho! Ho! Ho! And what is your name, little girl?"

"My name's Helen and I'm six years old," said the girl.

"Well, Helen, you come and sit on my knee here and tell me if you've been a good girl all year."

The girl climbed on to Daddy Bear's - sorry! Santa's - knee. It was a very lumpy knee, impossible to get comfy on. She wriggled and squiggled.

"So," growled Santa, trying to keep the girl still, "Have you been a good girl?"

"Oh yes, Santa," said Helen, "I've been very good all year and my mummy says I can ask for a doll and a Game-Boy and one of those teddy-bears over there" She pointed into the corner where Baby Bear was keeping a close eye on all the presents.

"Ho! Ho! Ho! Well, well, well, Helen!" roared Santa, "That little chap is one of my helpers, not a teddy-bear. But I'm sure we can find something for you. Why don't we choose a little present for Helen here?"

Baby Bear plunged his paw into a sack full of objects wrapped in Christmas paper and pulled out one labelled "Little Girl". He smirked and handed it to Santa.

"Here you go, little girl," said Santa, handing over the parcel. "Now, off with you and be good and I'll come round to your house on Christmas Eve!"

The little girl jumped off that lumpy knee, rattling the parcel, and went out. Mummy Bear gave her a pat on the head as she went past.

"Next child!" she called.

A small boy rushed over the floor and barged past Mummy Bear. Spotting Santa, he leaped directly on to the knee with such force that Daddy Bear gasped and only just stopped himself from belting the boy round the back of the head with his huge paw.

"Ooph! Careful there, sonny! Ho! Ho! Santa isn't as young as he used to be!"

The boy was unconcerned. "I've been good all year, I haven't missed a day at school and I want a sword and a painting-set for my presents," said the boy, all in a rush. He then looked about him and stuck out his tongue at Baby Bear.

"Well, well!" exclaimed Santa, "Well, well! You know what's what then, eh? And what's your name, young man?"

"Robbie."

"Well, young Robbie, let's see what we have for you. Little Elf, pull out a present for this young man..."

Baby Bear flinched at being called a 'Little Elf', but did as he was asked. He found a parcel wrapped in blue paper and passed it over. The boy snatched it and began to tear at the wrapping.

"What's this, then?!" he shouted, as Santa tried to stop him opening the parcel.

"What's this - a light-bulb?" He rattled it, and there was a tinkly noise. "A light-bulb that's popped! That's no good to me -"

Daddy Bear suddenly gripped the boy tighter and said in a low and threatening voice: "You just keep your mouth shut, little boy, or it'll be the worse for you. That's your present, now get out and don't tell your mummy, or WE'LL HAVE YOU!"

The boy's eyes widened and he could not say anything. With Mummy Bear's paw on his shoulder like a vice, he was propelled from the Grotto.

"Next!" bawled Mummy Bear.

It was another boy. His name was Sandy. With some caution, he entered the Grotto and approached Santa Claus.

"Well, well, and who have we here?"

"My name's Sandy," said the boy, all shy.

"Well, don't be afraid, Sandy. I may look big and fierce, but I won't eat you! My little helper over there will tell you that!"

Little Bear nodded dutifully and grimaced. It was no fun for him standing in the corner with that silly green hat on and those leather shorts, trying to look cheerful at all these silly kids getting presents. He wasn't going to get much for his Christmas unless Daddy Bear shifted all these presents which he'd bought on the cheap. PT's the department-store paid Daddy Bear enough for proper presents, but Daddy Bear had decided on stuff that the suppliers were almost paying you to take away. So there should be lots of money coming in.

"Now Sandy, have you been a good boy at school?"

Sandy nodded, quite untruthfully.

"And what are you best at? Sums, spelling, reading? I was always very good at gym but not much else!"

"Spelling," said Sandy, "I'm good at spelling."

"Well, I wonder if you can spell a word for me, to show me how good you are? Can you spell *acquisitiveness* for me?"

Sandy looked at Santa for a long minute. He was stuck after the letter 'a'.

"Hm," said Daddy Bear doubtfully, "Seems to me you're not very good at spelling. Now you do know you shouldn't tell fibs to Santa, don't you?"

Sandy nodded sadly.

"Well, we'll let you off this time. I'm going to give you a present now, but it won't be the usual kind. But you won't complain, will you? Because you have been telling fibs, haven't you?"

Sandy nodded his bowed head.

Little Bear pulled out a parcel which he knew contained a pair of size 10 boots with enormous holes in the soles, and handed it over.

Mummy Bear ushered the boy out to his waiting parents.

"Next girl please!"

A little girl went on in. Just then there was a commotion.

"You there," exclaimed an angry voice, "Just what do you mean by giving my daughter this?!" It was the mother of the girl Helen, and she thrust under Mummy Bear's nose a rather smelly tube of "*Fishpaste Toothpaste*". Even the manufacturers had admitted that, as a flavour for toothpaste, fishpaste had never really caught on. Mummy Bear flinched at the smell.

"Is there a problem, madam?" she smiled politely.

"Yes there is! This is no present for my little girl - this isn't even a present for a juvenile delinquent! What do you mean by it?"

Mummy Bear gripped the irate mother by the forearm and gave her the kind of squeeze which bears reserve for best buddies. The woman gasped in pain and turned white.

"Now," whispered Mummy Bear, "I'm going to pretend that you haven't spoken to me, madam, and I'm going to pretend that you and your spotty little daughter are very happy, and then I'm going back to my post at the door and you're going away home. *Understood?*"

The mother understood and went away faintly, leaning on her daughter.

Meanwhile the girl in with Santa had asked for a bedside lamp in the form of a fairy's cave. Santa did not have one to hand but little bear came up with a pack of candles which, due to a manufacturing fault, had no wicks. When the girl complained, she was given another small parcel - of used matches.

"Now, off you go. Not many children get two presents from Santa! Don't you go telling everyone, or they'll all want two presents!"

Santa waved her out of the door, then took advantage of the pause to have a swig from his hip-flask. His nose turned a little redder and his smile a little broader. It was turning out to be a good day. With an outlay of £12.50 he had two huge sacks full of presents ready to hand out. And since the store paid him £100 per day, things were looking good. Perhaps next year he could hire some extra staff... A glorious career opened up: Daddy Bear's Christmas Services... National Santa Services (NSS)... International Bear Logistics...

"My name's Sven," said the next small boy, interrupting Daddy Bear's brandy dreams.

"Ho! Ho! Ho! Sven, is it? And what would you like for Christmas then, Sven?"

"I would like a big globe, a mouth-organ and a new album for my stamps," said Sven. "And I think you've got a false beard. My granny's got false teeth. Have you got false teeth?"

Daddy Bear opened his vast jaws to show that his teeth were perfectly natural and sharp. Sven fell off Santa's knee in terror - a mouth like that could make mincemeat of a little boy in seconds. As he fell off, Sven knocked over the Christmas Tree which stood there, breaking one of the coloured balls.

"Tut tut!" exclaimed Mummy Bear, bustling round, picking up the tree and batting Sven's bottom. "Careless little boy - look what you've gone and done! Cost us a pretty penny, that ball did? Now what are we going to do? How much pocket-money do you get?"

"Forty pence, please miss," mumbled Sven, holding his sore bottom.

"Forty pence - well, isn't that just handy: that's exactly what one of those coloured balls cost. Come on, hand it over. And then be off with you - coming in here, breaking our decorations!"

Forty pence the poorer, young Sven left the Grotto. With no present.

"Next!" called Mummy Bear.