

# Myths



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It was one of those mild winter days in the desert southwest and Smiley Jack John, sheriff of the county, sat on the rickety front porch of his jailhouse. It was a log cabin of the type that folks hewed and hammered together just to get out of the rain until the Big House was finished. Brochures from the Chamber of Commerce had it that this historic building was the original trading post set up by the city's founder but there was strong doubt about it among historians. It would have to be over four hundred years old. The timbers were too new and it had a loathsome odor in the summer heat. Actually the thing was the brainchild of some mover and shaker in the thirties who sought to rival the claims of the capitol of the State to be the oldest city in the southwest. It took the labor of fifteen men to carve the timbers into the rough\_cut shape expected of frontier shelter. They were justifiably proud of their work. Only in the early sixties was it discover that they had built it on the spot where Juan Boca de la Vaca, the Father of Punta de Lanza, had his massive and continual diarrhea and, thus, the odor. This ancient colonic distress had caused him to become separated from the supply train going behind Don Heraldo Matriz del Valle, the great and bloodless conquistador who failed once again to find the Seven Cities of Gold. He did come into contact with some pretty strange medicine men with fathomless eyes who gave him a drink made of the boiled juice of a spineless cactus that made him forget all about killing and raping and settle down with a nice girl and raise a family. Don Heraldo founded the town of Santa Maria de Las Casas which went bankrupt in '08 because the mayor invested in some great real estate which turned out to be a thousand acres of sand and wind in southern Nevada just outside a nothing desert village called Las Vegas. He sold the whole plot, recouping twenty cents on the dollar, and considered himself lucky.

Juan Jesus Francisco Fernando Moreno y Dulce Boca de la Vaca, known to history as El Dedo Pegajoso for his thieving nature, had solved his bowel problems with the aid of river plants known to his wife, a captive Zapotec woman he had bought in Texcoco. They set about sculpting the sticky river

mud and logs from the bottomland forest into a sizable hacienda and trading post, the first along the trail north that was to attract many fortune hunters, desperados, explorers, and any who wished to sink from the sight of the Inquisition.

In a short few years his wealth was legendary and people came to build and live around this fortunate man. The soil was perfect for growing and the best crops were the cotton from Mexico that grew in four natural colors, and the chili pods that became known as Chili Cabron for the instinctive reaction to putting the fiery vegetable in ones mouth. Juan Jesus named the resulting town Punta de Lanza for the plethora of ancient native instruments of war and hunting to be found wherever one plunged ones hand into the dirt. The Spaniard was impressed by this ancient litter because it was obviously the site of many formidable battles. Actually it had been a refuse area for the tribes for hundreds of years. Two hundred years later the citizenry made a monument of the original buildings but the fire of 1830 took that away from them. There was sadness at the loss but most simply shrugged and said oh well and contributed to the building of a new bank which they felt was not only a fitting substitute but also more practical.

The log cabin was bigger inside than out which confused a lot of folks. It had two cells and a small closet-like bedroom to the back. The office was the main room. There were two desks and chairs that looked like they might have been expensive at one time. Several faded dusty braided rag rugs dampened the groaning of the floorboards as the big man walked about. Around the walls were numerous shelves piled, stacked, and randomly stuffed with electronic surveillance gear given Sheriff John by the government. He was part of the early warning system for the Border Patrol and, with the aid of superior technology primarily invented by men and women who cared less for human folk than for the sparkling whispers of cyberspace, could spot the difference between a coyote and a drunken man walking across the sensors buried under the sand along the river. He had only to tap in one short code and a top\_secret laser stuck its cute little snout out of a satellite in stationary orbit that not only notified every patrolman for a hundred miles of the trespass but could, if given enough insult, call in an air strike of Apache helicopters from the base on the other side of the Partes del Cuerpo mountains. That had happened only once but it was enough to establish for all time the evil reputation of Smiley Jack John, Sheriff of the County.

That fine winter day Sheriff John received a call from Fun or Else, the place near the plaza with the cute sign of the angelic little kid smiling up at

Daddy while holding a large axe behind his back. There was a small man going up and down the aisles of the store stuffing toys, games, action figures, plastic replicas of military hardware so realistically fashioned that it was hard to tell them from the genuine article, into a huge red bag. And he had no intention of paying for them. The manager told Sheriff John that the little guy kept raving how nobody in the whole world minded but the stupid people in Punta de Lanza and who do they think they were? The good Sheriff lifted his six foot six inch twenty seven acre body to a standing position, put away his Guns And Ammo magazine, climbed into his specially zooped up 4x4 that he told everyone was so fast he could be there before the bad guys decided which way to go, drove the two blocks to the corner of Garcia Ct. and Garcia circle, and arrested Santa Claus.

The situation in the store was like a scene from a movie. The manager, his assistant and two clerks surrounded and held a man who could not have been above four foot tall. At least it was assumed he was a man even though he was screaming a the top of a very powerful set of lungs that he was Santa Claus and not a man. "Didn't you hear that Santa was an elf? Jolly ol' St. Nick, you idiot! It was in that soppy poem fer pete's sake, what kind of family did you have anyway? No one ever read you the thing? Christ on a stick! I gave the crazy old man the story and you don't believe it! Wait a minute... you are... wait...I have it! You are Whiten\_something...berg...stern...steen! Elvira Whitensteen! Jewish, right? No wonder!" The young woman's jaw dropped." But these other thugs," he turned to the manager, "you! Didn't you like the red bike, Mikey? That was what you wrote to me, remember? A red bike 'like my best friend Roman" so now you want to have me arrested? What a cretin! If I had known..."

The manager went white which was very white indeed for he was an Anglo's Anglo, the product of a thousand years of accidental Nordic breeding. His mouth made a little O and he looked around as though someone close by might prove all this to be a mistake. A simple explanation, no matter how stupid, would do. The little man climbed the leg of the assistant and grabbed his coat collar in both hands. He put his face so close to the other man that their noses touched.

"And you! What the hell is your excuse? Everybody knows I am a thief, I am the bloody Patron Saint of thieves! They don't object anywhere else because they know who and what I am. I help whole economies, fercryin-outloud! Don't you take thefts off the annual tax toll?" At that point in walked Sheriff John. He stood in the doorway and nodded to the manager

who was a distant cousin. He eyed the scene, dwelling a bit longer on Elvira. He nodded again and turned.

“This the perp?” he asked eye balling the tiny man. “You been stealing a lot, have you? We take a dim view of that kind of behavior...”

“That kind of behavior?” What kind of geek says stuff like that? And, yeah, I steal from the rich and give to the kiddies. Can’t help it. Kind of a compulsion. In the old days I might have said it was a spell or weird, a can-trap, an exsufflation of my natural will, but you people haven’t the stones for work like that, and besides, I bet you don’t even believe it, don’t even know what the words mean, do ya, huh? Or how they could put such a thing over on ole’ Nick.” He had climbed down from the assistant’s chest and was standing knee high to the lawman, his fists dug into his hips, staring up at the Sheriff who had out a pad and pencil.

“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be used against you...”

“Yeah? Well, how about you stick that wad of camel spunk up your geekus, you over\_piled stretch of rat scat! That help any?”

“...may be used against you in a court of law.”

“Law? What do you fatty tumors know about law? Now, tying up the criminal and stretching him out between four horses and whipping them to a gallop...THAT was law!”

“You are entitled to an attorney. If you cannot afford...”

“I can’t pay for these silly ill\_made petroleum clots you call toys, you grainfed overstuffed hyper thyroidal porcine accident of nature, so how the living hell am I supposed to pay a lawyer?”

“...an attorney one will be provided for you. Do you understand these rights as I have told them to you?”

“Unlike your gas\_for\_brains friends here I understand fine! What YOU don’t get is that I am Santa Claus and I HAVE A RIGHT TO DO WHAT I DO!!!! I am Santa Claus and have been Santa Claus for a couple of millennia because you and your kind’s silly religion says it’s so. I thought I was going to get out of it a handful of years ago when one of the popes said I wasn’t really a Saint but did you listen? Nnnnooooo! So I have to keep this up until I am told by a higher authority to stop and YOU AIN’T IT !”

Sheriff John hauled the elf into the air by his collar with one hand and attempted to cuff him with the other. The metal restraints simply slipped off, much to the amusement of his prisoner. The lawman was not easily riled. He looked around and took a jump rope from one of the SALE \_

30% OFF tables and wound it around the squirming miscreant. The two wooden handles were perfect for carrying him to the 4X4 and flinging him into the seat equipped with special belts that held someone in place allowing an absolute minimum of movement.

The tiny creature was squealing and crying, “Unfair! Police brutality! He hit me! Your slime ball ridiculous excuse for a sheriff slugged me and tied me up like a rodeo calf...HELP ME!”

But no one did. They figured if Sheriff John had a prisoner there was a darn good reason. That, and no human being who knew anything of the lawman wished to cross him in the smallest way. There had been some few patients with remodeled noses, jaws, and cheekbones in the local hospital who had tried to pull something on the huge constable. Without the least change of pulse or expression he stopped their unlawful activity and cost the Medicaid system several thousand dollars. And got a little blood on his brogans. It took less than five minutes to drive the two blocks and haul the little man out of the vehicle and into a cell. His mouth never stopped working nor did he moderate his language.

The booking process, as a rule, is a simple thing. Photo, fingerprints and questions. The little man was the exception. He refused to hold still for the camera and had to be tied to a chair. Even then his head came out a total blur. The fingerprinting was more bizarre still. The elf could kick like a horse and had a jaw full of teeth that could latch on like a gila monster. The lawman had to pry him off his coat and handle him like a calf at roping. With the little body secure under one arm so the feet could find nothing vital to injure, the Sheriff crimped one arm behind the miscreant’s back while splaying the fingers of the other, inking them and splattering a print form with smears that could have been anything. But that was alright because no one questioned the Sheriff’s methods or records. Ever. During this process so crudely accomplished the elf uttered an unbroken stream of invective, threats, and curses so vile that there were no written symbols for them. He spat out stories of the

Sheriff’s youth ranging from the simply unsavory to uncanny recollections of the lawman’s thoughts at particularly difficult junctures, things no one did or should know. The shrieking stopped only upon the little man being shoved into a cell and the door clanging shut before he could make a break for it.

As Sheriff Jack John began the paperwork Santa paced the eight foot by ten foot cement cage.

“Name?”

“Santa Claus, you sorry excuse for a cockroach!” he growled rubbing his wrists, “Don’t you listen or what? Maybe you like Ol’ Nick better. Easy to spell. Easier still to recognize. Also has other connotations that..”

“Address?”

“Now that one is a bit vague. Do you want me to say the North Pole? NO one can survive at the North Pole! I have always wanted to meet the idiot who first put that one to roaming the minds of children.”

“Address unknown. Date of birth.”

“I don’t remember”, he said, falling into a mood. “I have always been around. Nobody ever mentioned a birth, but then nobody said anything about a town filled with dogbabies who haven’t the mental power of a tick.”

“Height? Mmmm, I make it about three foot.”

“I’ve been several different heights but never was I three feet. 3’8” is the present measurement, J. Edgar.”

“Weight?”

The elf pressed his face against the bars of the cell, a scowl distorting his features.

“Weight? WEIGHT!? You have got to be the least intelligent of a dumb species! What do you want my weight for?”

“Weight?”

“Jesus, Joseph and Mary! To say you have the capacity of a bug would be to insult the entire insect world! Weight? Now, lessee, more than a pebble and less than a mountain. No, that’s going to be too hard for you...about seventy pounds. Give or take a pair of handcuffs. That OK?”

The lawman swiveled in his chair to face the cell.

“Seventy pounds seems a bit extreme. Course with that mouth I could probably say a thousand and no one would convict me.”

“Oooohhh! That’s so heavy! What a wart on the buttocks of Mother Nature you are! Come on in here and try it yourself. Weigh me. Pick me up and see. Better be aware that over a thousand years or so I have learned a few good moves, even ones for dangling in mid\_air.” He leered and smiled showing two rows of sharp, spiky teeth.

“Accused attempted to intimidate law enforcement personnel” he spoke as he wrote.

“They’re gonna really believe that!”, but the elf shut\_up.

“Next of kin?”

“You joking or what? I told you...”

“None. Any problems with health, drugs, alcohol, sexually transmitted diseases?”

The elf did not say a word. He just stared at the giant lawman with a genuine look of disbelief.

“None. You had no ID. Do you have a social security number? Drivers license?”

“I get around without one. What is the matter with you?”

“Personal affects: one coat, red with fur...what kind is that? Ermine? Pants, red: boots, patent leather, black: one large red bag made of...satin? What?” No reaction from the little man who had sunk into an obviously depressed state. “Oh well, let us see how many things you have in...what the...there must be three, four hundred toys in here! What is this bag all about?”

“It’s a magic bag, geek. A magic bag, as in not understandable by folks who sit on their brains. You remember magic, do ya, Jacky?” There was a sharp toothed leer on the face of the elf.

The Sheriff sat up straight as though a cushion spring had goosed him. No one had called him that since he was twelve and he had beaten the De la Vaca kid half to death for saying the name in a derisive tone. Done it with a smile, too, which had earned him the nickname. It was not a pleasant expression.

“Yeah. Jacky, and I didn’t come with much that year because of how you hurt Raul. But you got some stuff. The paint by numbers set, the six pair of socks, fresh underwear. You hated it all and that was when you stopped believing in me. Good thing too because I was on the edge of not believing in YOU and, trust me, you wouldn’t have liked that.”

Smiley Jack John sat staring at the elf. His jaw muscles worked tightly against each other and he clenched the arms of his swivel chair. He squinted for a moment, as though trying to see something in too bright a light, then shook his head and turned away. That was that. No word, no sound, not so much as a drop of sweat. It never would have occurred to him to ask where his prisoner had gotten that information. It was impossible and therefore not true. Smiley Jack John had put away his soul that Christmas, shut down his dreams and begun his journey to becoming a tough no\_nonsense man, the kind he imagined inhabited the pages of his gun magazines. Was this really Santa Claus? He simply did not care. The little man had committed a crime and he was there to see that he paid. He had told that to many



prisoners. He did not care what they did, but if it was against the law, his job was to catch them.

“Wassa matter, Jacky? Ole’ Nick getcha by the surprise buttons?”

“Dinner will come at six. Lights out is when I leave. You will be up by five and shower. Breakfast is at six. Any trouble will see you tied to your bed. The district judge is away for a little fishing and you will have to wait. Shouldn’t be more than a couple of weeks.”

“A couple of weeks! That will put it past Christmas! Do you have any idea...what a thought. You with an idea! An oxymoron. ...do you know what will happen if I don’t make my rounds? Gonna be a shit rain round here, that’s for sure.”

“Makes no difference to me. Christmas is just another workday. A little quieter, but work all the same. I’m going out to make rounds. Want me to bring back anything? Comic books? Ouija board? Maybe a pooperscooper for eight tiny reindeer?” That was as close to humor as the Sheriff had been in years and he did not mean to be funny. He put on his hat, adjusted his Sam Brown belt, and walked to the door.

“Reindeer? You bag of gopher puke! Your mother surely raised an idiot, poor woman. Knew her well, by the by, and she once told me how you and little Raul stole some apples from the Ruggles orchard and .....”. The click of a door latch cut off the last of the story. That was alright. The sheriff knew the ending.

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The Menudo Factory was quiet when Smiley Jack John sat down at the counter beside Professor Raimundo Molacha. The two were not what one would call friends but the professor was the one person in Punta de Lanza who did not judge the giant lawman, who had no axe to grind or bone to pick with him. Friends, no, but their meetings were more than just civil. The Sheriff had great respect for the scientist and often sought him out to discuss something bothering him, a question of ethics, a point of politics or, most often, something far more personal. His opinions held real weight with Jack John. He looked up and nodded without expression at Raul who was scowling at him from behind the little serving window. The two had never resolved their trouble and probably never would. The Sheriff ordered a bowl of menudo and a coke from the ever smiling waitress, Zelda Hand, and greeted the professor.

“How you been, Jack?”. Molacha was also the only person allowed to

come close to the hated appellation. “You look puzzled. What’s up?”

“I guess you could call it puzzled. I gotta little guy in a cell who...well, he says... he says...this is gonna sound screwy but he says he’s not human.” “Not too unusual for a criminal type. I assume he did commit an unlawful act.”

Smiley looked sharply at the professor but saw no sign of sarcasm or other intellectual torment. He did not expect to find it but one never knew.

“Shoplifting at Fun or Else. Real little guy, ‘bout three foot nine, has a red satin bag and everything.”

“That is small, but what’s this about a bag? What does that have to do with...”

“He says he is Santa Claus!” the big man blurted. “Craziest damn thing, he knows things about everyone who comes in contact with him. Things he shouldn’t...no, couldn’t know. Personal stuff. And he’s a nasty little bugger.”

“Santa Claus, nasty? That’s new.” The older man looked at Smiley Jack John, Sheriff of the County, with budding suspicion. “Is that why we’re talking?”

His bluntness always surprised the lawman even though this was always the way it went. To the point, avoid pitfalls, replace your divots.

“Doc, I think I need a professional evaluation on this guy. He isn’t right. I need to know if he can stand trial.”

“For shoplifting? An evaluation for a fourth rate crime?”

“You don’t understand. This new governor has put in place all kinds of law saying when a prisoner is straight enough to do the time and when he just needs treatment, some pills, maybe his mother! I won’t take any chance of having a bust turn around. Damn governor was a closet hippie!”

“You voted for him! And I have never known you to make any mistake twice.” Smiley nodded seriously. “So you are here because...?”

“Come on doc, you know why. You always know why.”

“But I, like you, need to be asked. I need to be able to justify the action. So. You want me to do an interview of your tiny prisoner even though you know I am not strictly qualified. And make a report for you that you can wave in the faces of the lawyers who may come after you. Is that about it?”

“That’s it. You can do it, you’re a smart guy. All those Ph.D.’s....”

Ah yes, thought the professor, always the same rationalization for not

paying good money for an expert. He had tried many times to convince a petitioner that cheap and inexpensive were two different things and that nothing was cheaper than free, but that only increased the appetite. So they asked him to do everything from finding a star someone had paid a lot of money to have named after his son, to the plumbing problems of Mrs. Abeja. This one, at least, involved something he had made into a mild hobby and a three foot eight inch Santa Claus was a bit beyond his ability to say no.

“I must ask you this and I know how you will react but... have you thought about contacting Dr. Menschbender?”

The response was immediate but modulated. “Not him! I’d rather be sued and become a truck driver! I don’t want him anywhere near the prisoner. Can you imagine what that legalistic quack would do if he found out? No! Nowhere near!”

Molacha could and did imagine it. He knew of the hatred between the two. The vitriol was like a river, deep and wide.

Dr. Harapha Menschbender was a relative newcomer to Punta De Lanza. A refugee from the eastern cities where shrinks were a dozen for a dime, he came west to ‘serve the health of the nations’, whatever that meant. He was of orthodox stock and held the view that law and order was for the people and not the system. After just one encounter with the

Sheriff who held very opposite opinions the doctor made an instant analysis of the man and came up with the worst. He believed the lawman to be a homicidal paranoid on the edge of quiet panic with the near absolute need to dominate. Menschbender had heard of the fight between Raul and Smiley Jack John and that was documented evidence that the man should be put away before someone died. The doctor was sure many of the Sheriff’s victims were buried in the desert and made small expeditions to likely spots amenable for dumping mutilated bodies. Besides making a lot of holes in the landscape and tearing up valuable plant life, he accomplished nothing. He began to write letters and memos to friends in the state capital, public agencies dealing with law enforcement, even the governor. He detailed every incursion by the

Sheriff into the freedoms of the people. The letters went more and more frequently. They grew heavier, often with surveillance photos and purloined copies of hospital records. His practice suffered greatly finally dwindling to a handful of neurotic men and women who could only find love through confession. He could not so much as see the constable without developing an itch that only got scratched by another scurrilous epistle. The poor man would scuttle to his office and spend hours digging into the arcane

literature of his profession for new, heart stopping ways to say ‘dangerously nuts’. The agencies in the capital always sent the letters on the sheriff with an admonitory note like, ‘What the hell is this all about?’ or “Please be more careful.” or “Come on Jack! Can’t you keep this quiet?! You know the rules, keep your hands to yourself.” No one was going to haul Smiley Jack John before the bar because of his connections with some very scary covert organizations within the federal system. Still, it bothered him ‘like a bottle fly on a horses ass’.

The professor sighed.

“I can do it now if you like. Would a couple of hours do it?”

“I don’t know, you’re the doc. I’ll provide you with a recorder and tape. I’ll want to hear it all later.” The professor cleared his throat and shook his head. It would do no good to get into a lengthy discussion of ethics or civil rights. The Sheriff paid for their meals and the two drove in silence back to the jail.

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“This was not my idea. Jack is a friend and asked, so...” Professor Molacha stood clutching a spiral notebook and looked down at the tiny man sitting on the steel bunk, his legs dangling over the edge at least a foot off the floor.

“Shut up and sit down, Sugar. I know why you’re here but I had no idea muscle head had any friends. A new situation maybe?” He motioned to the plastic folding chair the sheriff had provided over his strenuous objection. ‘Nothing hard, Doc. Too easy for him to grab it and start swinging. He’s a whole lot stronger than he ought to be.”

Molacha’s eyes widened at the mention of his childhood nickname. Raimundo was always Ray to most people when he was young. With his friends Molacha became remolacha: beet. He had been a moderately popular kid, not one to take offense easily, so he had not minded when his friends made the transition from beet to sugar beet, then to plain sugar. But it was so many years ago that few remembered it.

“Jack was right, you know things you shouldn’t. How do you do that? Can’t be research. Or can it?”

“Right, Sugar. Research. Drilled for smart and struck dumb.” He sat looking at the floor, kicking his feet like a little boy. “Look. It’s obvious no one, including you, has any idea who you’re dealing with, so if we’re going to do this let’s look for some light. And with rapidity, OK?”

“And with a minimum of sarcasm. I’ll try not to be so stupid.” He flipped open the spiral, clicked a ballpoint, and looked the elf up and down. “Didn’t say

you were stupid. Said... I meant you were...oh hell! It was a smartass remark anyway. Not dumb, ignorant.” The little man seemed subdued.

“Yes, Well...when it comes to...how shall I say this?...non-humans I must admit my ignorance is near complete. Jack said you insist you are not human, is that right?”

“No foreplay, huh? Not even a kiss? OK, I can live without it.” he said, settling back on the bunk, his hands folded behind his head. “Where should we start? Maybe where you tell me why an astronomer is playing shrink? Maybe I should tell YOU.”

“Does that bother you? That I’m not qualified?”

“No, no, you reek of qualification. No jive, Sugar. So let me start where I want.” the elf raised his head and stared at the professor with a mild, almost sad, expression. “This may seem a bit strange but...well...you deserve a bit more of the truth than you wanted to know, so...”

Deserve? thought Molacha. Interesting he isn’t nasty with me.

“I’m not nasty! I’m just trying to get through. You have the slightest idea what it’s like to be a major world figure for nine hundred years and come up to a situation like this? Of course not. Had to’ve been there. OK. First, I wasn’t born. Not anywhere or anytime, I just am. I came with the Mother and will go out with Her. Hope I can ditch the clothes before we go.” He looked with disgust at his red coat and pants trimmed with ermine, at his shiny black buccaneer boots, all the while twirling a red fur trimmed stocking cap. “I hate this stuff. Who wears clothes like this? Who EVER wore them!” “Not born, just is.” The professor said it as he wrote. “That IS a bit unusual, don’t you think? You make it sound like a package deal.”

“Package...? Not brilliant, but better.” When the elf laughed it left a shrill trail on Molacha’s nervous system. “There are a lot of us. We came with Her.”

“You are not from around here, then?” Molacha scribbled something in the spiral.

“She and I settled in the north of Europe. She liked the possibilities and I found some pretty nice girls my size.”

“Tell me about your mother. Did you get along? Where was your father all this time?”

“How could anyone but a weak fleshed human devil, with which this benighted planet teems, NOT ‘get along’ with The Mother? Everything you have comes from Her, every bit of food, the very basics of living are all from Her. Who in their right mind...but, there you go. That’s the answer to the

first two if you have ears. And Father...well...what can one say about dear old dad? What do you know about war gods?"

"Your Father was God?" Molacha asked without looking up from his notebook.

"Right! God! What an idiot you can be without half trying. I asked what YOU knew about war gods. Got that? Plural. Gods, with an S." The sinister smile had returned to the elf's lips. And the leer to the eye.

The professor looked up with a start. "Wha...? Oh. I am sorry. My mind wanders."

"Really? So lets wander, only together."

"OK, good. I am truly sorry to have lost...hmm...where do you want to go first?"

"History." The little man crossed his legs on the bunk and rocked side to side, a waving sea plant, a tree in a mountain breeze.

"The basics, good. I know so little about..."

"Just about everything, even what you profess to know well. Professor. Hah!" He shut his eyes tight as though that might stop the flow of insults.

"OK, history, from the top, like where everything began." He closed his eyes and continued the slight motion. "You and your kind, the others, believe some strange stuff. Like infinitesimally small original matter that went bang and there everything was, even Time. Some kind of cosmic Oops. A fart, maybe. You will forgive me please if I refer hereafter to such theories as crap." He waited.

"Yes, the Inflationary Theory. It might be interesting to hear your ideas on that."

"No it wouldn't and I am no 'layman'. I'm Ol' Nick. I KNOW things, alright? This is no theory, no collection of pixels, buddy. We're talking reality here. So, if I may be so bold, just shut the hell up and listen." He opened his eyes and glared.

Molacha looked down at his spiral, ballpoint poised. There was a feeling about this tiny...what? Man? Elf? Oh come on! Give me a break! he thought. Ok, I'll listen and try not to be condescending.

"That would be good. You are an opinionated arrogant bastard, you know that?" The professor kept his eyes on the notebook and said nothing. Santa closed his eyes and began.

"The coupling of genders is not the beginning. It is not even what IS. Coupling is the process not the product. Like the Word that was formed by The Tongue and put out by The Breath. It all has an importance unknown

to you, Sugar. It is the Creator. But withal, none of Them are The Speaker. No history starts or carries on without The Speaker. He is not He, She is not She. The Speaker is the One Who Is. The Unspeakable. The problems arose when humans tried to put genitals on God. Or Goddess, whichever.”

“ Course that nearly drove your black robes mad. They heard it, saw it from the Fires of Beltane to the Crow Mother of the Hopi people and they feared it, hated what they feared and were drawn to it like moths to a candle. It wasn't the priests we feared. It was the ones who had shut themselves away, the ones who not only lived a celibate life...which I understand, by the way...but hated the other side of life, the fecundity if you will. These were the ones who worked their arcane darkness on the people. These were the ones who planned the takeover of the different forms of The Mother and made Her into something syrupy sickly sweet. Blue is definitely not her best color.”

Molacha would have grown restive if he could have moved so much as a cell. The visions came as the elf spoke. He saw The Great Mother draped in cheap cloth, made to stand on serpents She Herself had nurtured and set to their messenger tasks. He could sense the downward motion of thought as the black robes, his ancestors, beat the joy from the folk, made heathen a mortally dangerous thing to be, poured the waters of fear on the fires and generally being very bad guys.

Santa reached into a pocket Smiley Jack John had missed in the body search. He produced an elaborately carved briar pipe, tamped a bit of black\_as\_night vegetable matter into it, produced a flame from his finger tip and drew the smoke deeply into his lungs. He settled into his bunk, his back against the concrete wall, legs outstretched straight across the width of the iron bed. “Stuff'll kill me one day. Maybe. If they're lucky.” He cackled at his own wit.

“They found me in the fields. Not that it was so hard to do but they RECOGNIZED me. That was amazing, you know? These bemused ersatz holy men knew something of what they were looking at because of their experiences with my brothers and sisters in another part of the planet. We are extraordinarily hard to kill, they knew that, so they made a plan. Oh they were great for plans! Plans for huge buildings planted atop old holy places, plans for organizations that brought what they thought was holy fear to the hearts of the faithful. Just giant barbecues. The fat bubbled in the streets as they called out to Jesus! Humans never do anything by small measure. Anyway, they made one of those plans for me. They discovered

that I had volunteered to The Mother to take the part of Father Winter, the image of Justice, teller of tales...never mind. You wouldn't understand. Had to have been there. Sure put a wet cloth on my other work." The little man stared sadly into the bowl of his pipe. The sweet smoke had softened the light coming through the cell window. He sighed a sigh much too large for such a little being.

"Oh well. They used what they had learned from us and from friends who used to help. That's the point, isn't it? To help, not to hurt? These bats of darkness put a geas on me. New clothes, jolly laugh and all. The other stuff, the reindeer and clothes and houses set in eternal ice, that came later. It stuck because that was the nature of the geas. Whatever people perceived, whatever they wanted to pass on to their brats, was added. No matter that they were the superstitious rambles of drunken fools and old women so squeezed in the vise of male custom that they remembered only hate. What you have done to the nature of women is..." He stiffened, his hands formed into ugly fists thrust into the air. "You make me think about it, you bastard! You make me remember that these last centuries I've had other duties I had to leave undone. Duties I liked one hell of a lot better. Oh well..I was able at least to plant a few well crafted thoughts about those that kept the boat afloat. I'll get back to them one day. We are many and One! We can be sweet and kind, gentle and soft as a fawn's coat. We are also things you cannot imagine except in your deepest nightmares! We are..."

A howl came from him. Rage, the frustration of the Beast. Professor Molacha opened his eyes very wide and half rose from his chair. He could move now and was of a complete mind to get the hell out. But the elf held up his hand and smiled. It was not at all the sort of look the professor expected after so hideous a sound. He sat down, a question on his face. The noise had summoned the Sheriff who came with his club in hand. The professor waved him away. "It's ok. He's just getting rid of pent up emotion." Jack John grunted and left the two alone.

"I know I know, I'm sorry. Please stay. I'll make it short. OK?"

Molacha grunted assent but there was still a nervous tentativeness to his posture.

"What I'm getting at is this. It's all a play. Drama is the first thing and is supposed to incorporate humor. Great teaching tool, but they made it serious. Did a lot of damage. They changed the poetry into fire and hurt. If I seem to hate them it's only because I do. So for the last twelve centuries, give or take, I've been doing a forced duty of representing them and their



ideas. At first I was dressed more or less like the old days. Candles, holly, mistletoe. But the beard itched and these stupid clothes...where the hell did they get that idea? Yes. Hell. Well...there were times when I gave a lump of coal to bad boys and girls, a present for them to remember and be ashamed of themselves. Great way to raise kids, ain't it? No matter that a lump of coal to the poor might be the perfect gift. The ice had receded only a little while before and the winters were pretty stiff. But where was I to get the ditzy little things, carts with silver wheels, dolls, JUNK! Where does all that come from? The folk said it was the elves that made 'em but I resisted that one. Bad enough they made a mockery of one of my names by making me a Saint. I don't make slaves of relatives. And no one lives at the North Pole. That's plain stupid. But where does it all come from? You guys! I steal it. Been stealing it for a long long time and it's gotten so that whole economies depend on the theft. Oh yeah, Ol' Nick is the friend of Man! And bankers and grifters and politicians! Sorry. I get excited too easily these days. Makes me mean."

"I understand." the professor said. From the look on his face the elf could see he really did. Or was beginning to. This seemed to embarrass the little man.

"So, I steal. Always have. The folk used to put out food for me so I would let them alone. Ate pretty good in the old days! But now? I am in jail for shoplifting! Only in this pissant town would someone exist like the jolly white bread giant out there who would arrest Santa Claus. And he says the judge, who I know well, won't be back for weeks. Fishing! What a geek! Christmas will be long gone and have you any idea what it will be like if it passes without me? You won't like it much. The crowrobes missed that part. They had no future sense and didn't limit the operation. It swelled and bloated until the whole world was involved. Without my visit there isn't closure to the year. Nothing ends. Winter could go on forever! Do you get it, Sugar? I MUST be out of here before Christmas!"

The professor ducked his head at the statement. There was nothing he could do and the little man should know it. He scribbled something on his pad and looked up. "Let's get back to the subject at hand. About your father...?"

"My Father, OK, so back to the lab. I asked you before what you know about war gods. Well?"

"Nothing, because we left all that behind a long time ago. This IS the age of reason after all."

“You have no idea, do you? About reason or anything like it. You and your kind have been so busy killing the innocent and denying Spirit that reason has escaped you. I’m not talking reason or even reasonable. I’m talking war gods. Do you know who or what one is? Or have an idea what one would be if they existed?”

“Your father was a war god. OK, let’s go with that. Which culture is that from? What was his name?”

“No good! How do I get through here? Right. I’ll change the appellation. In what you call psychology there are personified impulses, ideas that are primal and need discipline. If they get away from you there’s hell to pay..literally. But these feelings are not new with your race. They existed from the Beginningless Beginning and will continue to Be with whatever people are in the right condition to gestate them. Is that better?”

“Much! Thank you. So your father was one of these primal instincts.”

The elf paused and took a deep breath. This was such a tedious conversation. “Right, that will do. It’s still easier to say things in mythological form. Well..The Mother has always had a consort of one kind or another. She is constant, always what She was created to be but these others...they come and go, if I am being clear here. Just which one is My father is irrelevant. At least, it’s never occupied my thoughts at all. It makes no difference. My brothers and sisters are of the same mind. Who Dad is just doesn’t cut the corn.”

“Colorful phrase but it doesn’t relate to my question.”

“Look, Sugar, the answer would relate even less. Suffice it that I am here, The Mother is my mother, as She is yours, and this session is staggering like a drunk. Is there anything else you want to know? Am I crazy or what?”

“Two questions if you don’t mind. First, where do you live the rest of the year? Are you busy stealing all that time? And second, if you are a primal being, or the son of one, why don’t you just...leave?”

“Excellent! You do have a mind after all. Where? Just about anywhere at all, anywhere I like. And yes, I’m always stealing something from somebody. The second is more complicated. Haven’t you ever heard of elves and iron? How it is supposed to melt us, kill us, weaken us somehow?”

“My grandmother used to tell stories...”

“A good woman, she. And in her role as elder she tried to tell you the truth but you insisted on education that took you away from the core of things. From Unity to Chaos. But..that’s OK. Iron doesn’t do squat except

slash and pierce. Much of that were tales we introduced and encouraged. Helps to keep the enemy off balance. But there are things that bind me. Just leave?’ Suffice it to say I can’t and lets put it down there. You have your business, I have mine. Americans are too used to what they call Liberty to bow their heads before anything or anyone, let alone a Law that is not explained. Anything else?”

“Actually...”, Molacha said as he looked at the pages of notes before him, “no, I guess not. It would be wonderful to talk longer but Jack needs the report by tonight. Maybe we will speak again sometime.”

“Oh, we’ll speak alright. Just not to each other. I need to say one more thing to you. Off the subject, but the words keep coming and if I don’t pay attention.... Time is not a line or a circle or anything sensible. Time is a thought and thoughts change.” He was especially intense, eyes boring into Raimundo Molacha like diamond drills. He held up one hand as though to stop motion. “I know that makes no sense but it will. Trust me, it will. And you will remember.”

And he did remember...for awhile. But the forgetting process in humans is strange, more like storage capacity. Later it made less sense than the first time, but he remembered.

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“What does it look like, Doc?” After a brief stop at the college library the two men had returned to the Menudo Factory. They had a corner table in the back where they could speak at length about arcane subjects like the Mother, elves, Father Winter and Santa Claus. It was strewn with notes, a micro recorder and an open book.

“You heard the tape. What conclusion can I, as an amateur, come to except that he is delusional at worst. Yes, he’s sane’ by legal definition. I also believe him to be moderately dangerous if frustrated beyond his limits. Those are quite broad, however. I can write a report that probably will carry as much weight as most, but...” He looked down at his hands. The fingers were twisting about each other and there was light sweat on the palms. “How did he get the information, such personal stuff too?”

“Yeah, I know. He seems to read thoughts like the morning news. While you were with him I did some checking and there is nothing on any data base about those names and incidents in relation to persons named. Of course I may have missed something. There are banks they will not allow me into.”

Molacha could not imagine what those must contain. Smiley Jack John was known for having information on a suspect so complete and at such speed that it was a given that he had deep security connections. He could be a very scary man.

“I don’t suppose it matters, especially for your purposes, but it nagged at me...something, a memory. After he said what he did about Time I knew I had to look into this with a more objective eye. Maybe he was right and these things are better described in a mythological context. Jung thought so.”

The Sheriff shifted in his chair, the closest he could come to letting the professor know he did not have any idea what he was talking about. Embarrassment was akin to physical threat to the big man and he was beginning to feel the need to defend himself. Molacha hurried on to block the blush.

“Excuse me, Jack. I tend to talk to myself, try to explain things out loud. What I mean is in this book.” He tapped an old leather bound volume in Greek. “This is an eighteenth century edition of a much older work on alchemy. There is a chapter here on the ‘boiling away of the enemy’. Those are substances that corrupt the intended result. They are cooked in a big sealed caldron and then....”

“Can we cut to the chase here, Doc? I have an appointment with the mayor.” He gave out a brief relieved sigh. He had to be quick to get away from certain emotions.

“Was there anything strange to you about this interview? Something you maybe can’t put your finger on?”

“The whole thing is strange. What are you getting at?”

“He was absolutely certain. His assurance was very attractive. When he said he had ‘other duties’, other roles to play, I took that for granted. It was what he said and why would he lie? His assertion that Winter might not end if he does not get out before Christmas, what do we make of that? I don’t know. There was a feeling...”

“Well, hell, Doc,” the lawman rose and threw a dollar on the table, “feelings or no feelings. If you say he can stand trial, in writing, that’s enough for me. Thanks Doc. I owe you one.” Molacha watched him walk to the door.

“Sheriff!” He stopped and turn back to the professor. “What this book says, in effect, is about names. Do you recall some of the names people have given the Devil?”

Jack John frowned in momentary thought, then shook his head. “Can’t say much about it. Never paid any attention.”

Satan is Hebrew for ‘ enemy’. But other cultures have more colorful expressions, ones that mean something in their lives.”

“Sorry Doc, but you gotta make it quick.”

“I’ll send you with this, then. One of the old common terms for the devil is the same as the name for Santa Claus. He used it several times. Ol Nick.”

“Like I said, I never paid that much attention. Guess I won’t start now. He isn’t going to give anyone any trouble for awhile.” He turned and walked out the door.

You’re a good cop, thought Molacha, but when you’re wrong, you’re really wrong.

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The brew began to bubble when the local paper, The Daily Chile, received a phone call from an interested citizen that Sheriff Jack John had a most unusual prisoner. The editor himself sallied forth to the reporter’s task knowing that he, being a council member and generally important about town, was the only one that might get the lawman to give any information. Jack John detested the media and the press in particular. Too many articles had been written about him after the thinking of Dr. Menschbender. He owed neither them or the public anything except safe streets and quiet nights. Tertullian Jones, owner, editor and publisher of The Daily Chile entered the office of Smiley Jack John, Sheriff of the county, with a smile and recorder slung over one shoulder, and almost stuck the microphone up the nostrils of the lawman.

“Mornin’ sheriff. I understand you have a very unusual prisoner. Care to comment?”

“No. And where did you get this information?”

“A concerned citizen’ called about forty minutes ago. He said we should definitely write something on this. Something about a dwarf?”

“I have nothing to tell you. He was caught shoplifting and I am holding him over until the Judge gets back. Nothing more to it than that.”

There was a shriek somewhere behind Jack John. Someone wanted the newsman’s attention.

“I am 3’8”, an elf not a dwarf, and I gotta get out of here before Christmas!” It was powerful voice, hard edged with an animal tone, almost a snarl. There was an imperative to it.

Tertullian strained to see over the shoulder of the Sheriff who was standing now and towering over the newsman.

“That’s all, Mr. Jones. I’m busy and you will just rile my prisoner. Who

knows what that could mean.” The threat was personal and plain. He began to move on Jones, backing him to the door.

“Why don’t you want anyone to see him? Is it true he says he is Santa Claus?” The sheriff kept moving, Jones continued backing up.

“You know that every year we pick up half a dozen drunk Santas. Comes from giving them probation from detox and making them ring bells on street corners. Now, go away. There’s nothing here for you or anybody. Thank you for dropping by.” And have a nice day if I don’t find you first. Smiley Jack John was nothing if not a master sender of The Vibe. Everyone knew the feeling and fell all over themselves to be civil to avoid it.

Everyone except Tertullian Jones. He had a romantic notion about his job, of what his responsibilities were. He believed it was about ethics and bringing the news to the people, regardless of rank or status. No feeling or body language threat was going to deter him from his legal right to know. Sheriff John’s ham of a hand flashed out and caught the editor’s arm. It did not hurt much but he knew it was time to go with the flow or be broken.

“Thank you for your time, sheriff. I’m sure I can get something out of this. See you in the funnies.” He turned and left, leaving the door slightly ajar. The lawman stepped up to close it when it burst open and there was a blinding flash of light as Tertullian Jones and his Leica got the shot that would be seen around the world. Jack John slammed the door very hard but the damage was done. The next morning’s edition had large headlines: SHERIFF ARRESTS SANTA CLAUS. NO COMMENT, SAYS JACK JOHN. The accompanying photo was a classic in the making. It showed a little man with a full flowing white beard and hair, wearing a red suit trimmed with ermine. He was standing at the cell bars with a red stocking cap clutched in his tiny hands. The expression of grief was, for any actor, to die for. The tear struggling down one ruddy cheek, eyes tipped practically on end, mouth set in a sweet, gentle, ineffably sad half smile. What law enforcement person in their right mind could arrest someone so...so good!

Jack John sat at his desk, his feet propped on a chair, reading the paper. If he felt anything about the article and picture it did not show on his face. But he was rereading it for the third time. The elf chuckled in his cell as he looked over the Sheriff’s shoulder.

“Good shot there, Jacky, don’t ya think? I think he got my best side. Whadaya think, huh, Jacky boy?”

“It’s all the same to me, runt. He did his job. I was too nice. There won’t be a next time.” He turned toward the little man. “You can see this from

there?” It was a good twenty feet from the desk to the cells.

“Gifts from the gene pool, Jacky. I can hear pretty well too.” His face was a study in serious concern. “Did you think they wouldn’t find out? The Mother has her ways. She won’t let me languish here.”

“It wasn’t your mother who made the call.” Jack John looked out the window.

The elf gave a low laugh. “You were the one who asked. Besides, it wasn’t Molacha who dropped the dime.”

“How do you come up with this stuff? What made you think I was...”

“...thinking it was Raimundo Molacha who blew the whistle? Jacky, you’re so thick. I know most everything you humans think. You aren’t good at hiding it. Not good at all. Why, I remember one night the Czar was in prayer and...” Another story was ruined by the sound of a closing door as Smiley Jack John, Sheriff of the county, went about more important business than listening to the ravings of a thief.

“You can run but you can’t hide, Jacky. Yessir, thick as an English brick.” The elf tried on his happy face but failed to convince even himself. He was in a spot here and nothing he could think of was going to change it. Another legacy of the geas: He must never challenge the law of man or nature. Unless something drastically supernatural happened soon he would miss his rounds for the first time in more than a millennium.

Tertullian Jones put the story on the wire. He thought there just might be an award of some kind in it for the paper. The services pounced on it like lions on Christians. The phones began ringing at The Daily Chile and the Sheriff’s office in a bare forty minutes. The major networks wanted interviews, Larry King would give an entire show, Donohue wanted him for a panel on the subject of oppression of women and little people. Everyone had an angle. Three separate inquiries came vis a fax offering hundreds of thousands of dollars for the rights to make the story as docudrama. Jones laughed and gave lengthy phone interviews describing the town, it’s people, sheriff John and “the little guy”. Smiley had a set response before the day was gone.

“I’m sorry, there is no story here. The suspect is being held without bond because he is a vagrant and would no doubt disappear if he were free. It is the Judge who sets bail and he is away for a much needed rest in Mexico. He will return in January, if you wish to attend the arraignment. Thank you for your concern but it is misplaced. Goodbye.”

This, of course, had no other effect than to fuel the flame and bring

more attention to what the Sheriff thought was a cut and dry situation. The phone rang incessantly and the automated response was recorded and played on all major network newshours. The lawman dismissed these intrusion as a price one paid for enforcing the law. He was just as scornful of the messages that began to pour in. They were relegated to the circular file but there were so many that they now littered the floor. There was the added irritation that many of those were from foreign sources. Smiley had always thought of the U.N. as a weed that should never have been planted in U.S. soil. It was controlled by and run for the benefit of foreigners, and payed for by his hard earned dollars. Foreigners had no rights to the many blessings of this glorious land. It was only for the native born and, occasionally, if they were good, naturalized citizens. The so\_called native Americans' were a part of the outlanders that should have been scoured from the scene early on. These communications only strengthened his bigotry.

In a few days they no longer came from other countries but from authorized' embassies from within the U.N. building itself. Jack John traced enough of them to see that they were not the work of some lone kook with covert access to the databases of these nations. India made several requests to be allowed to send a fact finding group to assure themselves and the world that Santa was in good health and that all measures were being taken to ensure blahblahblah. Canada was equally polite but less relevant. Norway called, Sweden offered its assistance in mediation. Egypt's fax was seven pages of meanderings about the inequities of Christian society. Imagine! Jailing one of the most revered personages of that religious system! Obviously written by a fanatic, thought the sheriff. All over the world there were TV and radio speeches, discussions by sociologists and directors of prestigious think\_tanks, all attempting to make sense of this violence to basic human rights. The question was no longer concerning his existence, but his humanity. Just what was Santa, anyway? It was not long before the terrorist organizations of the world weighed in with their threats and manifestos'. FREE THE RUNT signs appeared on freeway overpasses in California. Similar slogans were spray\_painted on public buildings from Honduras to Pakistan. U.S. embassies around the globe were busy removing FREE THE KLAUS graffiti from their protective walls, vehicles, flagpoles, toilets and guest books. The protests were not confined to the poor and other miscreants with nothing better to do. It was across the board. All humanity objected to the imprisonment of an icon, especially one so closely associated with the happiness of children.



There was only one communication expressing support for his position. That was a short telephone conversation with Francis “The Barstool” Mugello, a Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States.

“How are you Jack. Been a while and I thought, with all this ridiculous turmoil, that you might want to hear a friendly voice.”

“Boy howdy, you’re right there! Good of you to call, Frank. I’m doin’ alright at this end. Can’t say the same for the rest of the world.”

“I know what you mean, Jack. I just wanted you to know that if this thing starts through the system I’ll do whatever I can to squelch it on this end. You’re too valuable to be entangled this way. I hope you’ll keep doing what you do. You’re a model for every law enforcement agency in the country.”

“Thank you Frank” he said politely. Sheriff John was as unswayed by applause as he was criticism. “That’s high praise coming from you. I appreciate it. Be assured I won’t be dissuaded from my stance on this. It is all so simple.”

“Good to hear it. I’ll let you go. Just remember you have friends.”

The Sheriff and the Justice had become acquainted during a briefing in Washington for top Justice Department personnel. The reason a local lawman like Jack John had been invited to such a prestigious conference was a bit cloudy. Most assumed it had to do with Punta de Lanza’s proximity to a major air base and the amount of money the DOD poured into the town to cement political and economic relationships. It went much deeper than that. Jack John had been a source of sensitive information for many officials who had few to no covert informants. Mugello knew the Sheriff before they formally met. The Justice had extensive files on many people in all walks of life who held similar views of government and finance, and might prove useful in future. To paraphrase the great hipster, Lord Buckley, if he didn’t have it, he knew a guy who knew a guy who could get it. The two men instantly understood each other. They spoke together for several hours and spent a few days roaming about the Capitol. Frank showed him all those places the lawman knew only through electronic media. One casual stop proved most enlightening.

“This building is fairly new and has no particular relevance to anything except, I believe, that window there...third floor...to the right of the flag pole...is where someone you know very well has his office.” The judge assumed an innocent expression but watched his new friend carefully. Not much escaped the Mugello eye. How that translated to the brain was up for debate.

“So that’s where old Fred sits his ass down. I bet it’s a big beautiful office. Comfortable chair and a thousand dollar desk.”

The Senator made some swift mental notes. Fred. Ok, third floor, Blair Building. There had been noises of a covert group operating from this building. Fred. Right. Unlike his colleagues on the bench this Justice felt impelled to be as well informed as possible of the underbelly of government. How else could he gauge the political import of any decision? He became, in turn, the source of choice for what he called 'creative information'. From that day he had made it a point to cultivate the friendship of the sheriff of Punta de Lanza. Once, he went so far as to ask for a Bureau security search on the lawman. The answer was a polite, "mind your own business." That told him more than he could ever learn from a dry report. He found little ways to assist Jack John. It was his quiet intervention that killed all those malignant letters from Dr. Menschbender. The poor shrink had no idea who he was dealing with.

The phone call had a visible effect on the Sheriff. He actually smiled while reading another report of mass graves found in Sudan.

Eight days after the arrest of Santa Claus and three days before Christmas Eve a group of young men and women checked into the Holiday Inn. They were the advance party for an ex\_president of the United States who had a Peace Institute in the midwest that focused energy on disputes around the globe. They had successfully separated warring factions in four mideast countries, arranging talks between them mediated by experts in International crisis management. They were, quite simply, the best, and they were in Punta de Lanza with the certainty that they could bring this situation to a satisfactory close within a few hours. Their contact person called the sheriff to arrange a meeting. But no matter how she emphasized her Chief's exalted position in the history of the world, or how many ways she tried to make him recognize their accomplishments under far more dangerous circumstances, the answer was always the same.

"I'm sorry, but your help is not needed. There is nothing to mediate. The suspect is being held without bond because he is a vagrant and would disappear if he was free."

"But, Sheriff John, perhaps we could work out a deal where he is allowed to attend to his Christmas rounds and come back for trial."

At this point the Sheriff nearly lost it. The people of Punta de Lanza knew when this was happening because his voice became very soft and his speech slowed so he was distinct and clear. They feared this and avoided it like a rattlesnake.

"Now listen closely because I will not repeat myself," he said in a voice

like a mellow autumn breeze. “I don’t really care who your boss is. As far as I can tell, he and you are crazy as bedbugs. I know what he did and didn’t do which is why I didn’t vote for him. Not on a bet! This little runt is going before the judge because he violated the law in Punta de Lanza. I don’t give a da..., I don’t care if the whole universe is peaceful and nice because of your meddling. Go home. There is nothing for you to do here. And do not on any occasion visit this office. Ever! Good bye.” He slammed the receiver down before she could make retort.

“Way to go Jackie! Arrest Santa, insult a past President of the country you pretend to love so much. Good record so far. Maybe you should record your stupidity and let the phone do the walking.”

In truth, the Sheriff had thought of that but refused to give in even that far. Besides, it gave no personal satisfaction to let a machine cut them short. There was nothing quite like scorn in the human voice in a head to head confrontation.

“Whatever happens, nothing is going to get you out of here before the judge gets back. He will hopefully sentence you to a long spell in County Jail and I intend to see that you serve every minute of it. I’ll see to it if it takes my last breath!”

He was breathing rather more heavily than usual. Not that the casual onlooker would be able to tell the difference, but he did, and he knew the Elf did too.

“Oh no, your last breath will be awhile yet. It won’t even be in this forlorn little town. And you will be old, very old. Enough time to see the egregious errors of your ways.” The elf pressed his face to the iron bars, an evil laugh forming deep in his throat. “You want to know how? Or when? I can tell you...” The Sheriff chose not to hear that.

“Before you take too much joy in all this,” Jack John said, leaning back in his swivel chair, “I want you to know I have all the information I need to keep track of all the troubles in the world, and I KNOW you don’t have anything to do with any of them. You’re just not very important after all.”

The two stared at each other in iron silence. The little man broke it. He scowled and shook his head.

“You haven’t the slightest notion what you are saying. Of course I’m not responsible. None of this chaos is because of me. Knowing something is going to happen is different than the doing. Because I know the sun will rise tomorrow is not the cause of sunrise. You are so right, buddy. I’m not the cause. You are!” He jabbed the air in the lawman’s direction with a finger.

Jack John slowly turned the chair back to his message strewn desk. “Maybe so, maybe not. It doesn’t matter. You commit the crime, expect to do the time.”

“Catchy.”

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The internet and all forms of communication media were buzzing with hot news about invasions of small nations by their medium sized neighbors. There were brush fire wars and ethnic massacres in places so separate from one another that the UN was in session twenty hours at a stretch trying to figure the finances to send troops to bring down the political heat before the flames reached the cities. Smiley Jack John had his own sources of intelligence that came from such deep ops organizations even the President had access to them only on a need to know basis. He was deep into reading some of those reports when the final call came through.

“Sheriff Jack John? Please hold for the President.”

Bingo! thought Smiley. The last call wraps it up, and Bubba, at that.

“Sheriff John. Good morning.” That soft southern Oklahoma accent swooped through the line like a dove with teeth. “How’s everything down there in your beautiful State? I understand you finally got some rain. Washington is still cleaning up from our last storm. Maybe we should ship some of it to y’all.”

President Peachy Kilmer always laughed at his own humor, not so much that he thought himself funny, but to give the listener a clue. Opening pleasantries, humor, approach the subject with concern, humor, ask for ideas, another jocular, suggest options, at least one more joke to cement good\_ old\_ boy intimacy, make a request, closing remarks and warmest regards to family/co\_workers/superior, and hang up. Not much of that had to do with people. Mostly it was a kind of southern candy wrapping. Hardball with a drawl. The humor was a segue, a greased slide, sometimes a sharp stick to poke the listener who was already so honored to speak with the President that they wanted to puke. Jack John knew humor when he heard it, and that was not it.

“Thank you, Mr. President. What can I do for you?”

“Boy! They said you were direct. Ok. Let’s take this a little at a time, if you don’t mind. Just to make sure I have this clear, you have an unusual prisoner in your jail who is to stand at The Bar for shoplifting. Am I correct?”

“I think, Mr. President, we can speed this up if you just let me tell you where we are.”

“Good idea.” Peachy cleared his throat, a clear sign for those that worked for him that The President was becoming irritated. It was never a good idea to have one up on the Commander\_in\_Chief. The Sheriff did not know the signs and would not have cared if he had.

“Mr. President, I have in custody a man caught in the act of theft from a local toy store. He claims to be, you will pardon me, Santa Claus, and an elf.”

“Elf?” exclaimed Peachy, then slightly off the phone as if to an assistant, “Is Santa Claus supposed to be an elf?”

There was a shout from the cell. “You bet your sweet love life I am! An elf and this oafish sphincter spasm of a lawman is keeping me here til after Christmas!”

“Is that your prisoner? He didn’t say what I think he said, did he?”

“Yes sir, he did. He’s a nasty piece of work.”

“Santa Claus? Nasty?”

“Mr. President, what do we have a rule of law for anyway? Why do all of us who serve the public swear to uphold and defend the Constitution? Is it so we can pick and choose among our friends and, in your case, petitioners? No. It is for Law and Order. An old phrase, I know, but one I live by. It would be nice to see the occupants of the highest office remember it at least once a day.”

“Why, Sheriff John, if I didn’t know better I would say you were on the edge of disrespect. Order is a whole lot more complicated than a straight line from here to there. We have a really serious situation forming up around the world. No less than fifteen possible border incursions, three civil wars and various ethnic battles. You know how crazy they can be. We’re talkin’ major carnage! Now, I don’t care what the little guy says he is, or WHO, there has to be a way to sort this thing out so all parties are served. Am I being clear on this?”

“No sir, you’re not. Neither I nor this little runt are the cause of any trouble. The problem came when the media poked its nose into the case. You should know better than anyone about media hype.”

Subtle, thought the elf, real slick, Jack.

“Now listen Jack...”

“No sir, I don’t think I will. I have the clear law on my side, and no amount of coercion will shake me from it. It is simple sir,” the Sheriff slowed way down, as though speaking to a simple child, “The suspect was stealing. That is against the law everywhere. I do not let thieves out of my jail. The

judge will be back...”

“I’ve already spoken to the judge.” Bubba was mad now. It showed in his politeness, his coolness under fire.

“Oh? And what did his honor say?” That fat butt headed judge better not cave in, thought Smiley.

“That’s neither here nor there. We talked and...”

“Yes sir?”

“He seems to be afraid of you. He said he didn’t want to mess with Jack John. Just what is it you have on this man, Sheriff?”

A pregnant silence ensued. Thata boy, your Honor! thought Jack John. I bet the connection became suddenly real fuzzy just when it got critical.

“You just don’t understand the nature of this situation, Sheriff. Half the world thinks everything is going to hell in a handbasket and that you made the basket! For the good of the country then? There is likely to be a lot of dislocation and hardship for American interests at home and everywhere. In short, Sheriff John, it’s gonna be a wooley booger of a time if you don’t let him outa there before Christmas. I thought if I called personally there might be something we could work out. Are you sure there isn’t?”

“Sir, I have the highest respect for the office of the President of the United States. For all elective offices. That’s what so many fought and died for and I would never deny that respect. But when I am asked to bend the law, then I begin to wonder if I am speaking to the office or to the man. I didn’t vote for the man.”

There was another silence, hotter this time. It was a well placed blow to mention those who had died for their country to a sitting President who had never paid his dues in the form of military service. Jack John knew it had struck home. Right where he had always wanted to put it. The President cleared his throat. Obviously this pissant Sheriff of a nothing town in a third rate State had no ideas what kind of authority he was flouting. It was also very plain that he was not going to move from his point.

“Well, I guess you have to do what you think best. I admire your dedication to justice, but...”

“I don’t care about Justice. That’s the job of the courts. I deal with Law. Different.”

“Er...yes, I see. Thank you for taking time to speak with me. I have an idea of something...but I’ll have to research it a bit. One of my people will be with you shortly. Is that ok?”

“Whatever you say, Mr. president.”

Without so much as a postscript the two men hung up their phones and snorted.

“Two\_bit southern white trash!”

“Jesus! The man’s a closet fascist!”

One hour and twenty seven minutes later came another call, this time from the President’s security advisor, Rodney St. Giles.

“Rodney. Yes. A hideous man.” commented the elf who continued to know things he should not. “Not just his body, all limp on one side, but his soul. Brrrr. One of the damned, for sure.” For once the little man was reluctant to go on with his sarcasm. The sheriff picked up the receiver. He was no longer surprised by the elf’s powers.

“Good afternoon, Mr. St. Giles. I think you have something for me?”

“Gor! The people who made this dossier on you missed your prescience. Very effective shock value. I will remember. And, yes, I have something quite nice for you. The President has authorized an immediate opening on the security council. The seat is on the committee within the committee, the movers and shakers of the entire intelligence community. He wonders if you might be willing to come to Washington in two days for further talks.”

Let him wonder, thought the lawman. “No, Mr. St. Giles, I won’t be able to attend then, or any other time. I know that council, I have information on all its members and would be caught dead in their company. Lesse, there’s that faggot, Fallowstone and Laurence. I have been keeping up on his body count. Matsukosi, who I believe is a mole for the Japanese movement to raise another military worth the name. And how is the good...what is he this week?...rabbi? Priest? Witchdoctor? Anyone who would lie to his God isn’t worth the rope to hang him. And Mrs. Smith? She makes the Bitch of Buchenwald look like the Virgin Mary! Traitors, all of em. You want me with that group? Couldn’t think of anything better, Mr. Director?”

There was a liquid gasp at the Washington end. St. Giles was having difficulty breathing.

“Wait! What do you mean you know that council? No one knows it, or the members, for all that. Especially not the members. Where did you ge...”. He was

interrupted by something of genuine rarity. Smiley Jack John had thrown back his head and was laughing from his belly, his knees, the very tips of his toes. It was not a pretty sound.

“Mystery is the salt wherewith life is seasoned. I read that someplace. Goodbye Mr. Security Advisor. Don’t bother to call again. This whole affair

will be over in a short time.” The sheriff used the mighty power of the simple click of a disconnected call.

He wheeled about in his chair to an adjoining desk holding an impressive array of computer equipment. He tapped in a code. There was the momentary squeal of the scrambler and the several sounds of a simple message. He was still chuckling.

“You enjoyed that!”, cried the elf. His amazement made him jump from one foot to the other. “There is a God! Jack John had fun today. Governments are toppling, whole economies hang by a thread, but Smiley Jack John got off a good one. And loved it! Yessss!”

His words were again cut short by the click of the door closing. Sheriff John had left the building.

The message had gone over the wires to a place in Wyoming where there was a nondescript building on a seldom used street. The sign on the door said, ‘ for lease’, but without a name, address or phone number. If one were to ask a real estate person and they looked into their files for a reference to the building, nothing would come up. It barely met the basic criterion for existence; being able to be found. No one remembered that this used to be the offices of the Kick A Hippie Foundation, given over completely to the eradication of flower children and their sympathizers.

The message was simple. “The rooster is trying to get through my fence” and it was signed, “Thor”. The name, given by an undocumented sub\_sub\_agency, was an affectation that he could live with. He was as close to being flattered as he could manage when they gave him a lead hammer fashioned after the comic book hero’s weapon. It was mounted on a base of depleted uranium, but the feeble rays found no purchase in Smiley Jack John, Sheriff of the county. This transmission was rapidly relayed to a dusty basement in a bad section of Washington, D.C., where it was hand carried to the third floor of an unremarkable office building. From there was issued a memo misdirecting the appropriate committees and White House personnel. The President was informed only of a very sensitive situation in the south\_west which, for reasons of politics and a looming re\_election campaign, would be best handled by the specialized staff of a wildfire group trained to ‘extinguish’ certain types of problems. That took less than an hour and all the while there was the growl of shredders and the clicking of keyboards as the paper and electronic trail was swept away. A non\_too\_subtle half formed plan was aborted. Specialists were re\_assigned. And impending war between Albania and Greece was avoided.



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Christmas came and went without full scale war anywhere. The U.N. had as firm a handle as it was able on the points of turmoil. It was enough. The nations of the planet began to appreciate the advice given over a hundred years earlier by The Prisoner of Acca, that war is death and peace is the cause of life, and if one country rises against its neighbor all nations must arise and destroy that government. At least they were trying. The difficulty seemed to be that the nations were losing their collective sense of humor.

Economies did not self-destruct as expected. In fact, they found they could do well without the materialism of Christmas, Santa Claus, and other seasonal icons that demanded as their blood\_due a total involvement in conspicuous consumption. Fathers renewed friendships with their children, mothers breathed easier for the loss of the financial burden. But there were also many who just loved to shop and others who were impelled to buy. Otherwise, a vital chemical would not be released

to the little docking spaces in the brain that controlled habits. For them there was always a place to score a fix, scratch the itch, fill the emptiness, the invincible American mall.

Meteorologists worldwide predicted an early Spring and mild Summer days. The snows were normal in the northern hemisphere and the southern weather was a delight of cool evening breezes, fragrant flowers and good drink. Everything had not just returned to normal. It had gotten better. The media, even The Daily Chile, found more fertile fields of sensational news to satisfy the public lust. And the elf sat in his cell waiting for the judge to finish murdering fish and get back to work.

There was a day of peace, no phones binging, no beepers beeping, no unwanted visitors asking stupid bleeding heart questions. The sheriff could again tip back in his chair on the front porch of his office and read his Warriors magazine, open his mail and clean his weapons. A lovely sunny winter day in the desert southwest. One day and that was all. The next saw the first shot over the bow by a nation who wanted Santa Claus to disappear from modern mythology. Sweden decided to withdraw its promised help for the little man. Others followed suit. However, these were not the ravings of the lunatic edge that were the snacks and meals of any decent reporter. That came from a splinter group of Hizbullah, one so distantly related and unsanctified that its leaders were being hunted by other terrorists. They were giving the profession a bad name. Sheriff John had received by coded transmission a photo of the group that had for months threatened a fiery

vengeance on The Great Satan. He sat shaking his head.

“Kids! They are just boys! Not more than seventeen or eighteen. And there’s only two!”

Two disgruntled bored students with a laptop had released the most repulsive, and therefore newsworthy, statement on the Santa Claus situation. THIS BLASPHEMY, THIS SANTA CLAUS CREATURE, IS AN ABOMINATION BEFORE ALLAH! IT HAS BEEN REVEALED THAT HE HAD UNNATURAL RELATIONS WITH HIS MOTHER AND THE BASTARD MONSTERS ARE THE PEOPLE OF AMERICA! THE DEMON CALLED OL’ NICK MUST DIE! DEATH TO SANTA CLAUS! The world press was on it like a bear on a fish. The world turned away from its vows. Its compassion was a bit overextended. In a matter of hours it was all over.

“Kids! What got into them? Probably came from decent homes and families. As much as that’s possible for those people.”

“Those people?”, spoke the elf, “Those people are not different from you. Well, maybe a bit less homicidal, but in the main they are your cousins. And their kids? Yeah. Look what you’ve done to the kids.”

Sheriff John swivelled suddenly around and gave the little man a look that could have fried eggs.

“You little son of a bitch! Every time something happens involving children committing a crime or bringing a government to a standstill you simpering cowards blame us. We were the ones with values, you weren’t. We tried to teach them basic stuff in schools like respect, obedience, honor, but you were the ones making the laws and said they had rights. Rights! To kill and maim? To hawk drugs on street corners like newsboys? And it’s all our fault. You and your kind should be forced to live in the worst parts of the cities. Then maybe you’d understand. Death is too good for some of em. For the rest...well...we could at least ask why they did what they did. I dunno. Maybe just shoot em. Ask later. But it isn’t our fault! Nothing is our fault! It all happened on your watch, not ours. So, bug off you little comsimp bastard before I set you straight with my bare hands.” His eyes were bugging out like a hyper-thyroidal marmot.

The elf backed from the bars. This kind of human rage always startled him.

“Jeesh! Take it easy, Jackie. You are mistaking me for human. I won’t mention it again. My God! What your blood pressure must look like!”

In the space of a breath the lawman was again in control of himself. That

was not a good thing, he thought. I have to watch it.

“Yeah, you oughta watch it. Someone could have a heart attack. To misquote an ancient aphorism, don’t let the little bastard get you down.”

That actually produced a twitch at the corner of the mouth of Smiley Jack John, Sheriff of the county.

“There’s a message on the computer that says the judge will be back Tuesday at the latest. That gives you three days more in my jail. Three more days for you to make a deadly mistake. It might be better if we don’t talk too much between now and then. Am I understood?”

“Ten\_four, general. I’ve wrung about as much out of you as I’m going to, so...ok...lets be meditative. I mean, I’m not stupid. I can take a hint. No siree, no more talking from me. Not a single word. Nope. Not a sound. See? I’m locking my mouth. See? Swallow the key. S’ok with me. Lets just be quiet a bit. I mean....”

“Runt?”

“What?”

“Shut the fuck up!”

Silence.

Three days of silence calmed the sheriff, almost lulling him into a sense of normalcy. Judge Leonardo de Alacran returned Monday evening and called the jail to ask what the hell had happened around there. Three weeks away and the world falls to pieces because of Jack John.

“No sir,” came the reply, “this is real simple. A case of shoplifting with multiple witnesses.”

His Honor took it on Tuesday, first thing. The elf did his usual dance, telling him things he should not know and calling him by his nickname, Lenny the Spike. It was the name given him by certain criminal elements who had the misfortune to come up before him. Despite the elf recounting incidents in his life that sent the blood to his toes, the judge was tough and the end was almost ordinary.

“The defendant is plainly guilty as a grinnin’ cat. Ninety dollars or ninety days.”

“Oh, that’s good, Lenny. I’m up for stealing toys because I have no money to pay for them. I don’t USE the stuff, Lenny. You want ninety dollars? Ninety parts of nothing. I DON’T HAVE NINETY DOLLARS...yer Honor.”

The Sheriff smiled with his lips but not his eyes. The judge gaveled the case done and Santa Claus was taken back to the jail to await transport to the county facility at Arsenic Falls.

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“Mornin’ Jack. What you got for us today?” The voice was disembodied as it sounded over the speakers. The jailer was sitting in a shatter\_proof glass cage set six feet above floor level so the visitor had to look up to reply.

The Sheriff plunked his bundle on a chair. It was the elf trussed with three leather straps, one around his shoulders, one around his lower legs and one about his waist where chains and cuffs held his hands out of harms way. There was a strap going from leg to shoulder in the back with which the lawman had hauled him around like an airport carry\_on. His mouth was taped shut.

“Here’s the papers on him. The records are all in order and in my files. You don’t need anything else.”

“Just like always, Sheriff. Anything special we should know about this fish?”

“Yeah. Don’t listen to him. Not a word. Take him and dump him in the back area.”

Most of the jails and prisons in that part of the country were run by private companies. Some, like this one, were not only managed but entirely planned and built by private concerns. They promised, and delivered, costs close to one third what the State would have spent. Not having to pay for something makes it so much easier to ignore that thing.

The front building was a true model of 21st century thinking. The room was circular with forty plus cells lining the walls. Each had a floor to ceiling shatter\_proof glass door for constant surveillance. There was a state\_of\_the\_art sterile self\_cleaning toilet and wash basin, a metal bunk with one thin mattress and a blanket. The temperature was monitored from the cage and stayed at an even 72 degrees twenty four hours a day. There was an odd thing though. None of the cells were occupied, nor did they look as though anyone had ever lived in one. The savings the company promised the voters had been even better than projected. And it was so clean! The whole thing was a facade, a false front to make any film maker proud. Behind the door marked BACK AREA was the real prison. It was as broad and long as a zeppelin hanger. There were unmade beds along the walls and an evil smelling toilet for every five prisoners. The floor was washed only once a month and that was by half hearted men who could not care less what kind of environment they inhabited. Occasional groups of visitors came to view the marvelous facility that cost so little. There was always proper warning and

the guards snagged a number of prisoners, bathed them and gave them new overalls. When the little bands of the good people entered the jail, (Sheriff John kept them small. Better management that way, he said) they only saw men sitting in small glass cages reading or sleeping, being treated in a very humane manner. After the fact finding body, or whatever it was, had left, the men were pushed into the back area once again. There were striking similarities to a seventeenth century English insane asylum.

The elf made muffled squeaks rendered unintelligible by the rag Jack John had stuffed in his mouth. The first jailer picked him up by the back strap and carried him to a door on the south side of the control cage. He undid the buckles and whipped the leather to the floor. The door was opened electronically and the little man was pushed through it before he could utter the smallest curse. That lasted but a moment before he began his cursing of the ancestry of the guards and all human beings. That he was Santa Claus, ferchrissake! The steel door was sound proof and the only listeners were the prisoners.

The little man set his back to the door as he faced the small crowd of prisoners who's collective body language promised exquisite pain. He decided that non\_interference sucked, geas be damned. He was going to take more than one of these walking brain dead with him. His wounds would heal, leaving only a certainty that humanity was only a virus, a malignant wart on the Bosom of the Mother. But these living arguments for abortion on demand would hurt and hobble for the rest of their days. And may those be very short, he thought.

The gang closed in, forming a curved wall of tattooed muscle around the elf. The leader dug his knuckle into one ear.

"I can't hardly believe my ears. There ain't nothin' wrong with my ears either. I got good ears and I listen real well, don't I, Tsosi?" He leaned his head over toward the toady standing just a step behind him.

"Sure do, Sosten." The scrawny prisoner turned to the rest of the men, his chest puffed a bit by the recognition. "The big guy can hear a block away. Why, there was once when..."

"Can it, pimp," the leader growled. "Now, little fella, you're gonna tell us all about what you was screamin' at the guard. Something about being Santa Claus? Bullshit! There ain't no Santa Claus. We got over that one when we were real young, didn't we boys?" A chorus of you\_bets and right\_ons answered back.

"What are you yammering about?" said the elf. He tightened his fists and clenched his buttocks in anticipation of the beating he was sure was coming. He lowered into a crouch. These poor shlubs had no idea what they were up against.

"Well, we kinda thought that since you was hollerin about bein' Santa, and seein' as how we were all told by our mothers that Santa doesn't exist, we thought that maybe you was callin' our mothers liars. You doin' that, squirt?"

“Good thinking, lightning. Your people married close, did they?”

“I used to believe in you, ya know. Every Christmas for the first five years of my life there was always presents and candy and shit. Then I guess my parents decided I was old enough to be told the truth, or somethin’. Anyway, they told me there wasn’t no such thing, that it was them that bought the stuff and put it in the stocking and under the tree. That was my first lesson why never to trust no one. Made me what I am today. Now here you come...some dressed up maricon...tellin’ us...ME...that they lied about that too. That really pisses me off!” He grabbed the elf with two of the biggest hands the little man had ever seen.

Santa poked his face into that of Sosten. “Yeah? That, and a pile of shit might make you a brain! I could tell you stuff...naa. Lets just have it out now. I’m tired of this, aren’t you, lumpy?”

“Tell me what? Spit it out, you little son of a bitch! What?”

“Nothing, I said. What was that about listening real good? Not the sharpest knife in the drawer, are you?”

The three others looked at Sosten with growing surprise. He wasn’t rising to the bait. There wasn’t a sign of that rage that swept rooms clean. No heavy breathing, no loud teeth sucking. What was going on? This little shit was putting it to their leader as no one had for a long time, and there were no survivors from the past encounters. The big man was actually beginning to smile.

Sosten Gabriel Fuentes was six foot four inches of hard rock muscle, scar tissue and prison tattoos. His residency at the County facility was a holding pattern until the court docket cleared for his trial for murder. Several of them. He was always puzzled at the attitudes of authority toward his various activities. He did it, therefore it was alright. Sosten was one of those unfortunate souls born without that mechanism in the brain that creates conscience. Live or die, it was all the same to him. His life had been so wretched, so mired in blood and mayhem, that he no longer had any fear of death. He welcomed it, but fought the battle to stay alive because that is what the human organism does. Everything living has some defense. His was abrupt, inordinately violent, desperately vile rage. No one had ever found what set him off. Something, nothing, anything. He slept the sleep of innocence because he knew no wrong. And there he was with the elf held high in the air telling his childhood miseries to any who could stand to listen. Suddenly the short fuse was lit. He scowled at the little man and began to suck his teeth. That was better, thought the other three. They joined their leader in

shouting threats of unimaginable retribution for calling their sainted mothers liars, anything that crossed their hate\_benumbed brains. Sosten dropped the elf on the floor and aimed a kick at his head which Santa evaded with uncommon ease, putting his own foot into the knee of his tormenter. He went down clutching the offended part, cursing. He snarled and rose from the floor like a cobra with a back ache.

“You son of a bitch! I’m gonna grind you...” The description was interrupted by the screams of one of the toadies as the elf drove his heel into his groin.

“You gonna talk or fight!” the little man shouted. “I’m kinda getting into this thing!” He twisted round the big man’s hand and, staring him in the eye, drove the tip of an index finger into the space just below Sosten’s adam’s apple. Sosten dropped him again, gagging and gasping for breath. The third toadie struck from behind, cracking two of the little man’s ribs. He screamed and rolled twice, getting to his feet outside the circle of his attackers.

“Nicely done, JoJo” he said, grinning at the one who had done the damage. “Remember the time Lucero’s kid...wahzzizname...Vick, and how the kid beat the crap outa you even though he was a couple of inches shorter than you?” JoJo’s jaw dropped. “Remember how your folks threatened to tell Santa Claus on you because you’d lost the fight? Well, bucko, now you fightin’ Santa himself and you are gonna lose this one too!”

He lunged forward trying to kick the prisoner’s knees but a giant fist from Sosten took him square in the temple. The elf dropped to the floor like a rag doll. Feet and fists pummeled him in what he later called, “your average shit\_rain.” Despite the beating the little man managed to crunch another groin, take apart a kneecap and smash three toes on Sosten’s right foot.

When the guards decided enough was plenty and came into the area to separate the combatants, they found three men in several shades of pain. The bleeding elf was sitting against the wall nursing cracked and broken parts. There was blood on the floor and the walls. A bystander who had urged the four prisoners to flay the hide off the little man was now cursing them for splashing blood on his pants and shoes.

“Stupid sons a bitches! Don’t you know about blood\_born diseases? Ya never know where the little bastard’s been!”

They extracted the elf by making him walk out to the guard station where they called the paramedics. He waited thirty four minutes in the wooden interrogation chair that was designed to deliver discomfort just below the conscious threshold of pain All through the wait he alternately



sneered, scowled, sniveled and leered. He told the jailers stories of their childhood, tales of failed Christmases, betrayals and parental insults. They all went outside to watch the ambulance recede into the distance just to be sure the little man was really gone and out of their lives and minds. Prison personnel are, by nature, very tough. In a surprisingly short time they had heard it all, seen most of it and tolerated very little.

“But that little shit...wow! Good riddance!”

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In the hospital the elf received a visit from one Patoi Garcia Jones, attorney\_at\_law. This was the same guy who had the interstate littered with billboards that said, “I’ll sue ANYONE anytime...just for you!” The signs all bore the same picture of him with a look he thought was serious and tough. He had never noticed that his mustache was cut on a slight tilt to the left and the right eye was off center making him look like Ben Turpin.

The little man regaled the poor lawyer with instant tales of his youth, the time he was caught masturbating by his sister and her friends, the golf ball he sent through the kitchen window showering splinters of glass into five pounds of expensive grated cheese ready for the hor doevrs for his mother’s new Years party. But the man was as tough as his signs indicated and he never lost his nerve. He and the elf came to a quick agreement on percentages and terms of employment and began to map a strategy. A suit was filed against the State that very afternoon alleging unsafe prison conditions for people under four foot tall. It alleged that there was a conspiracy against the elf because of all the international problems he was supposed to have caused. The State, in turn, realizing the dynamite in the situation, rolled over after several perfunctory bargaining sessions. There was no way the Attorney General was going to court with this one. The people’s treasury was relieved of several million dollars plus a first class ticket to Miami after a decent recuperative holiday at an expensive mountain resort run by the Mescalero Apaches who accepted him as possibly being a Katchina on R&R from one of the Northern Pueblos.

Four months to the day after his arrest the little man and an expensive lap\_top were sitting surrounded by nubile beauties on a Florida beach. One dark eyed cutie snuggled gently to his mending arm and cooed the sad cry of the Monetarily Challenged Beach Tart.

“Nicky, sweetie, there is this beautiful evening gown in the window of the hotel shop and I thought you would want me to have something nice to wear for when we have dinner with the mayor or somebody important, you

know, and I can't be seen in those old rags I have now and, well, it isn't that expensive and..."

"Nick, honey," sighed another, "I just have to have that Beamer, you know, the one we saw racing by the other night, and..."

"Don't you worry, my darling sweet man," whispered another, "I will take care of your every need while these parasites are out spending your hard earned cash."

"You have no idea how hard earned!" he whispered back.

"Then maybe we could go window shopping" she whispered again, wiggling her seductive way onto his groin, "you know, just a little and...well...I was thinking a lot about that emerald bracelet you said would look so great on me because of my skin color. It would be a very solid investment." Her wet lower lip pushed out ever so slightly giving the delightful Spring day a bit more luster.

"Ladies, ladies, please! One at a time. Yes on the dress, I called the dealer about the Beamer this morning and it will be serviced and ready Tuesday, and the bracelet is in my coat pocket. Go fetch."

Three giggly girls with their bottoms pouring out of impossibly skimpy spandex thongs jiggled at a dead run for the hotel room.

He chuckled at the sight. "You just leave it all to jolly ol' Nick."

He tapped in the code to retrieve his mail. Since his release from the county lockup he had received numerous unsigned and supposedly untraceable messages threatening his life if he ever decided to return to his former employment as Father Christmas. The elf considered these to be challenges that could not be ignored, not with his honor intact. The geas had been lifted at the sound of the judge's gavel and he was a free being once again. These threats were a call to action.

His laptop was vastly advanced over what the industry said was state of the art. He had been studying computer science for years and had a grasp of its subtleties unequaled in any University or laboratory. A simple alteration and the addition of an across the counter chip had accessed more power than most mainframes. Security systems of any complexity were no match for it. Not more than half an hour after he had asked the initial questions there came a list with the names and codes of all the anonymous agents cluttering his mailbox with their feeble fist\_wavings.

"What a bunch of fish they are! Have no idea who they are up against. But...well, lets see to it they find out." His finger was poised over a button. "Now", and he pushed it sending signals in a convoluted interactive arc from

# Myths

James Wood Jr.



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**Books:** sulphur and sawdust, slate and marrow, blister and burn, rinse and repeat, survive and thrive, (not so) warm and fuzzy, torture and triumph, oh, the elements, infamous in our prime, anais nin: an understanding of her art, the electronic windmill, changing woman, the swan road, the significance of the frontier, THE SVETASVATARA UPANISHAD, harvest of gems, the little monk, death in malaga, hope chest in the attic, the window, close cover before striking, (woman.), autumn reason, contents under pressure, the average guy's guide (to feminism), changing gears, the key to believing

**Compact Discs:** *MFV* the demo tapes, *Kuypers* the final (*MFV Inclusive*), *Weeds and Flowers* the beauty & the desolation, *The Second Axing* Something is Sweating, *The Second Axing* Live in Alaska, *Pettus/Kuypers* Live at Cafe Aloha, *Pointless Orchestra* Rough Mixes, *Kuypers* Seeing Things Differently, *SD/SD* Tick Tock, *Kuypers* Change Rearrange, *Order From Chaos* The Entropy Project, *Kuypers* Six One One, *Kuypers* Stop.

