

I was in a coffee shop reading the want-ads when I saw, "Macy's Herald Square, the largest store in the world, has big opportunities for outgoing, fun-loving people of all shapes and sizes. Working as an elf in Macy's SantaLand means being at the center of the excitement." I brought the ad home and my roommate, Rusty, and I were laughing about it. And he dared me to call for an interview. So I did.

The woman at Macy's asked, "Would you be interested in full-time elf or evening and weekend elf?" I said, "Full-time elf."

I am a 33-year-old man applying for a job as an elf. I often see people in the streets dressed as objects and handing out leaflets. I usually avoid leaflets, but it breaks my heart to see a grown man dressed as a taco. So if there is a costume involved, I tend to not only accept the leaflet, but to accept it graciously, saying, "thank you so much," and thinking, "you poor soul."

This afternoon on Lexington Avenue, I accepted a leaflet from a man dressed as a camcorder. Hot dogs, tacos, video cameras, these things make me sad because there's no place for them, no community. They don't fit in on the streets.

I figure that at least as an elf I will have a place. I'll be in Santa's Village with all the other elves. We'll live in a fluffy wonderland, surrounded by candy canes and gingerbread shacks. It won't be quite as sad as being some big French fry out on a street corner.

I have to admit that I had high hopes when moving to New York. In my imagination, I went straight from Penn Station to the offices of *One Life to Live*. In my imagination, I went out for drinks with Cord Roberts and Victoria Buchanan, the show's biggest stars. We'd sit in a plush booth at a Tony Cocktail Lounge and they'd lift their frosty glasses in my direction and say, "A toast to David Sedaris, the best writer this show ever had." I'd say, "You guys, cut it out."

People at the surrounding tables would stare at us, whispering, "Isn't that? Isn't that?" I might be distracted by their enthusiasm. And Victoria Buchanan would lay her hand over mine and tell me that I'd better get used to being the center of the attention.

But instead, I'm applying for a job as an elf. Instead, someone will say, "What's that shoe size again?" and hand me a pair of seven and a half slippers, the toes of which curl to a point. Even worse is the very real possibility that I will not be hired, that I couldn't even find work as an elf. That's when you know you're a failure.

This afternoon, I sat in the eighth floor SantaLand office, and was told, "Congratulations, Mr. Sedaris. You're an elf." In order to become an elf, I filled out 10 pages worth of forms, took a multiple choice personality test, underwent two interviews, and submitted urine for a drug test.

During the second interview, we were asked why we wanted to be elves, which, when you think about it, is a fairly tough question. I told the interviewers that I wanted to be an elf because it was the most ridiculous thing I'd ever heard of. I figured that, for once in my life, I would be completely honest and see how far it got me. They hired me because I'm short. Everyone they hired is short. I am one of the taller elves.

I have spent the last several days sitting in a crowded, windowless Macy's classroom, undergoing the first phases of elf training. We have been addressed by all sorts of instructors, who begin their presentations by saying, "This looks like an outstanding group of elves." Several of the bosses have led us in motivational cheers, a concept which stuns me to the core.

Following an eight hour day of cash register training, we were treated to a video presentation by the security staff, visited by interpreters for the deaf, and presented with "The Elfin Guide," a 40-page booklet of rules and regulations. This afternoon's training concluded with a tour of SantaLand.

SantaLand is beautiful. It really is. It's a wonderland with 10,000 twinkling lights and diversions. People enter and walk through a maze, which affords views of mechanical dancing penguins, train sets, spinning bears, and really big candy canes. They walk through a quarter mile of maze and wind up at the Magic Tree, at which point they brace themselves for Santa.

The tree is a tunnel designed to resemble a complex system of roots. The child is supposed to think, "I can't believe I'm inside a tree." But instead, I think it looks like a large scientific model of the human intestinal tract.

Once you pass the Magic Tree, the lights dim. It is dark beyond that tree. It is dark because Macy's does not want people to know that there are six houses. Macy's wants people to think that there is only one house, and one Santa, and he lives at Macy's.

They constantly refer to the movie *Miracle on 34th Street*. But even if someone believed in one Santa, why would they believe he lived in a department store? Nobody lives in a department store. The Santa houses are cozy and intimate, laden with toys. Each house has a hidden camera.

This afternoon, we learn the names of the various elf positions. You can be, for example, an Oh My God Elf, and stand at the corner near the escalator. People arrive, see the long line around the corner, and say, "Oh, my god." And your job is to tell them that it won't take more than an hour to see Santa. You can be an Entrance Elf, a Water Cooler Elf, a Bridge Elf, Train Elf, Maze Elf, Island Elf, Magic Window Elf, Emergency Exit Elf, Counter Elf, Magic Tree Elf, Pointer Elf, Santa Elf, Photo Elf, Usher Elf, Cash Register Elf, or Exit Elf.

We were given a demonstration of various positions in action, acted out by returning elves who were so on stage and goofy that it made me a little sick to my stomach. I don't know that I could look anyone in the eye and exclaim, "Oh, my goodness! I think I see Santa!" Or "Can you close your eyes and make a very special Christmas wish?" Everything these elves say seems to have an exclamation point on the end of it. It makes one's mouth hurt to speak with such forced merriment. It embarrasses me to hear people talk this way.

I prefer being frank with children. I'm more likely to say, "You must be exhausted," or "I know a lot of people who would kill for that little waistline of yours." I'm afraid I won't be able to provide the enthusiasm Santa is asking for. I think I'll be a low-key sort of elf.

Today was elf dress rehearsal. The lockers and dressing rooms are on the eighth floor, directly behind SantaLand. People have gotten to know one another over the past four days of training. But once we took off our clothes and put on our costumes, everything changed.

My costume is green. I wear green velvet knickers, a forest green velvet smock, and a perky little hat decorated with spangles. This is my work uniform.

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

Today was the official opening day of SantaLand, and I worked as a Magic Window Elf, a Santa Elf, and an Usher Elf. The Magic Window is located in the adult quick peep line. My job was to say, "Step on the magic star, and look through the window, and you can see Santa." I was at the Magic Window for 15 minutes before a man approached me and said, "You look so stupid."

I have to admit that he had a point. But still, I wanted to say that at least I get paid to look stupid, that he gives it away for free. But I can't say things like that because I'm supposed to be merry. So instead, I said, "Thank you." Thank you, as if I had misunderstood and thought he had said, "You look terrific." Thank you.

He was a brawny, wiseguy, wearing a vinyl jacket and carrying a bag from the Radio Shack. I should have said, real loud, "Sorry, man, I don't date other guys." People would have turned and looked our way. And he would have curled into a little ball and died.

All the Santas have different routines. Some want the children's names. So as you're leading the youngsters from the Magic Tree, you say, "What was your name again? It's right on the tip of my mind where I can't get at it." Then they say their name. And you say, "That's right. Van. You're Van. See, I didn't recognize you with that turtleneck. That's new, isn't it?" And it's always new, because they grow so fast they are always needing larger clothes.

Then you lead them to Santa's door and say, "Let me just check and see if he's ready." And you poke your head in and whisper, "Van." Then, half the time you'll usher the child into the house, and Santa will say, "Stan, it's so good to see you." It's hard when you have three or four kids in a group. It's hard to keep the names straight. And some of the names are names I've never heard. Vaneesha, Fohntaj, Great. A child named Great. I'm Great. That's a name which is bound to prove challenging once he gets old enough to start messing up.

This afternoon, I was Photo Elf for Santa Howard. Santa Howard uses names, and sits the kids on his lap, and asks if they've been good and what they want for Christmas. And then he asks what they plan to leave him on Christmas Eve. And they say, cookies and milk. And he asks, what kind of cookies? And they say, chocolate chip, or whatever. And he demands the Photo Elf to say, "Chocolate chip? That is Santa's favorite kind of cookie." I don't mind saying it, but I must have said it 60 times today.

This afternoon, Santa Howard got an Asian child who wasn't familiar with the idea of leaving cookies. Santa asked what she was going to leave him to eat. And she got a puzzled look on her face. He said, "Something round to eat?" And she said, "A potato?"

22,000 people came to see Santa today, and not all of them were well-behaved. Today I witnessed fistfights and vomiting and magnificent tantrums. Once the line gets long, we break it into four different lines, because anyone in their right mind would leave if they knew it would take over two hours to see Santa. Two hours. You could see a movie in two hours. Standing in a two-hour line makes people worry that they're not living in a democratic nation.

I was sent into the hallway to direct the second phase of the line. The hallway was packed with people, and all of them seemed to stop me with a question. Which way to the down escalator? Which way to the elevator? The patio restaurant, gift wrap, the women's restroom, Trim-a-Tree.

There was a line for Santa and a line for the women's bathroom. And one woman, after asking me 1,000 questions already, asked, which is the line for the women's bathroom? And I shouted that I thought it was the line with all the women in it. And she said, I'm going to have you fired.

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

This morning, I got stuck at the Magic Window, which is really boring. I'm supposed to stand around and say, "Step on the magic star and you can see Santa." I said that for a while. And then I started saying, "Step on the magic star and you can

see Cher." And people got excited. So I said, "Step on the magic star and you can see Mike Tyson." Some people in the other line, the line to sit on Santa's lap, got excited and cut through the gate so that they could stand on my magic star. Then they got angry when they looked through the Magic Window and saw Santa, rather than Cher or Mike Tyson.

But what did they honestly expect? Is Cher so hard up for money that she would agree to stand behind a two way mirror at Macy's? The angry people must have said something to management, because I was taken off the Magic Star and sent to Elf Island, which is really boring, because all you do is stand around and act merry.

This morning, I worked as an Exit Elf, telling people in a loud voice, "This way out of SantaLand." A woman was standing at one of the cash registers paying for her pictures while her son lay beneath her, kicking and heaving, having a tantrum. The woman said, "Riley, if you don't start behaving yourself, Santa is not going to bring you any of those toys you asked for." The child said, "He is too going to bring me toys, liar. He already told me."

The woman grabbed my arm and said, "You there, elf. Tell Riley here that if he doesn't start behaving immediately, then Santa is going to change his mind and bring him coal for Christmas." I said that Santa changed his policy and no longer traffics in coal. Instead, if you're bad, he comes to your house and steals things. I told Riley that if he didn't behave himself, Santa was going to take away his TV and all his electrical appliances and leave him in the dark. All your appliances, Riley, including the refrigerator. Your food is going to spoil and smell bad. It is going to be so cold and dark where you are. You're going to wish you never even heard the name Santa.

The woman got a worried look on her face and said, "All right. That's enough." I said, "He's going to take your car and your furniture and all of your towels and blankets and leave you with nothing." The mother said, "No, that's enough. Really."

Two New Jersey families came today to see Santa. Two loud, ugly husbands with two wives and four children between them. The children gathered around Santa and had their pictures taken. When Santa asked the 10-year-old boy what he wanted for Christmas, his father shouted, "A woman. Get him a woman, Santa." These men were very loud and irritating, constantly laughing and jostling one another. The two women sat on Santa's lap and had their pictures taken, and each asked Santa for a KitchenAid brand dishwasher and a decent winter coat.

This evening I was a Maze Elf. Nothing is more boring than being a Maze Elf. Other Maze Elves address children and ask, "What do you want for Christmas?" But really, why should a child tell an elf? Santa is who they've come to see. And it seems pathetic for an elf to try to outshine Santa. After children have passed the dancing penguins, they don't care if they ever see another elf as long as they live. The maze is overpopulated with elves.

This evening, I was stationed in the maze near the candy canes. Children would pass, bored. And I'd say, How are you doing tonight? What are you up to this evening? Good. Terrific.

I've met elves from all walks of life. The recession has hit New York very hard. Most of the other elves are show business people, but several of them had real jobs at advertising agencies and brokerage firms. Bless their hearts. These people never in their wildest dreams figured there was a velvet costume waiting in their future. They are the really bitter elves. Most of the elves are young, high school and college students.

Out of all the Santas, two are black. And both are so light-skinned that, with a beard and makeup, you'd never know they weren't white. Yesterday, a black woman got upset after, having requested a Santa of color, she was sent to Will. "He's not black," the woman said. We assured the woman that, yes, he was black. And the woman said, "Well, he isn't black enough."

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

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

Last Saturday, Snowball was the Pointer and a woman said, "Last year we had a chocolate Santa. Make sure it doesn't happen again." Snowball sent her to Will.

I spent time at the Magic Window with an elf named Rita, a dancer who was in the process of making a video with her all-girl singing group. We talked about one thing and another, and she told me that she has appeared on a few soap operas. I asked if she had done *One Life to Live* and she said, yes. She had had a bit part as a flamenco dancer two years ago when Cord and Tina remarried and had their honeymoon in Madrid.

And suddenly, I remembered Rita perfectly. I remember Cord and Tina's honeymoon like it was yesterday. Rita wore a red, lacy flamenco dress and stomped around the shiny nightclub floor, while Spain's greatest bullfighter challenged Cord to a duel. Rita said to Cord, "Don't do it, Senor. You would be a fool to fight with Spain's greatest bullfighter."

Rita told me that Cord and Tina's honeymoon was filmed right here in New York, which surprised me. I really thought they went to Spain. Rita told me that she performed her flamenco dance in the morning and then they broke for lunch. She was in the *One Life to Live* cafeteria and Tina waved her over to her table. Rita had lunch with Tina.

She said Tina was very sweet, but all she talked about was her love for Smokey Robinson. Tina fell in love with Smokey Robinson in real life. She drove a wedge between Smokey and his wife, and left the show so that she you could move to Los Angeles and be with Smokey.

I'd read that in the *Soap Opera Digest*, but it was thrilling to hear it from someone who knows the whole story. Later I was working at the cash register, and Stephanie, one of the managers, told me that her friend, Carol, was the person responsible for re-casting on *One Life to Live*, replacing the old Tina with the new Tina. I told Stephanie that I liked the new Tina. And she said, "Well, I'll tell my friend Carol. She'll be happy to hear it."

Then Michael, another one of the managers, got involved, and told me he has been on *One Life to Live* seven times. He played Clint Buchanan's lawyer five years ago when half the Buchanan family was on trial for the murder of Mitch Laurence. Michael knows Victoria Buchanan personally, and said she's just as sweet and caring in real life as she is on the show. He said that Clint tends to keep to himself and that Bo is a lot of fun.

I can't believe I'm hearing these things. I know people who know Tina, Cord, Clint, and Vicky. I'm honing in. I'm getting closer. I can feel it.

Today, a child told Santa that he wanted his dead father back and a complete set of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Everyone loves those turtles. A child came to Santa this morning and his mother said, "All right, Jason. All right. Tell Santa what you want. Tell him what you want." Jason said, "I want Procter and Gamble to stop animal testing." The mother said, "Procter, Jason. That's Procter & Gamble. And what do they do to animals? Do they torture animals, Jason? Is that what they do?" Jason said, "Yes, they torture." He was maybe six years old.

Tonight a man proposed to his girlfriend in Santa house number five. Santa asked what he wanted for Christmas and he pulled a ring out of his pocket and said that he wanted this woman to be his wife. The Photo Elf got choked up and started crying.

I got a new haircut and a few people complimented me, but it didn't register. I spend all day lying to people, saying, "You look so pretty," and "Santa can't wait to visit with you. You're all he talks about. It's just not Christmas without you. You're Santa's favorite person in the entire tri-state area."

Sometimes I lay it on really thick. "Aren't you the princess of Rongovia? Santa said that a beautiful princess was coming to visit him. He said she would be wearing a red dress and that she was very pretty, but not stuck up or two-faced. That's you isn't it?" I lay it on and the parents mouth the words, "Thank you," and "Good job."

To one child I said, "You're a model, aren't you?" The girl was maybe six years old and she said, "Yes, I model, but I also act. I just got a second callback for a Fisher Price commercial." The girl's mother said, "You may recognize Katelyn from the My First Sony campaign. She's pictured on the box." I said, "Yes, of course." All I do is lie, and that has made me immune to compliments.

This afternoon, I was stuck being Photo Elf for Santa Santa. I don't know his real name. No one does. During most days, there's a slow period when you sit around the house and talk to Santa. And most of them are nice guys, and we sit around and laugh. But Santa Santa takes himself a bit too seriously. I asked him where he lives, Brooklyn or Manhattan. And he said, "Why, I live at the North Pole with Mrs. Claus." I asked what he does the rest of the year and he said, "I make toys for all the children." Santa Santa sits and waves and jingles his bell sash when no one is there. He actually recited "The Night Before Christmas," and it was just the two of us in the house. No children, just us. He says, "Oh little elf, little elf. Straighten up those mantel toys for Santa." I reminded him that I have a name, Crumpet, and then I straightened up the stuffed animals. "Oh little elf, little elf. Bring Santa a throat lozenge." So I brought him a lozenge.

Santa Santa has an elaborate little act for the children. He'll talk to them and give a hearty chuckle and ring his bells. And then he asks them to name their favorite Christmas carol. Most of them say "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer." Santa then asks if they'll sing it for him. The children are shy and don't want to sing out loud. So Santa Santa says, "Oh little elf, little elf. Help young Brenda here sing that favorite carol of hers." Then I have to stand there and sing "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," which I hate.

Late in the afternoon, a child said she didn't know what her favorite Christmas carol was. Santa Santa suggested "Away in a Manger." The girl agreed to it but didn't want to sing because she didn't know the words. Santa Santa said, "Oh little elf, little elf. Come sing 'Away in a Manger' for us." It didn't seem fair that I should have to solo. So I told Santa that I didn't know the words. Santa Santa said, "Of course you know the words. Come now. Sing." So I sang it the way Billie Holiday might have sang if she had put out a Christmas album.

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head.

Santa Santa did not allow me to finish.

This evening I was sent to be a Photo Elf in house number two. The camera is hidden in the fireplace, and I take the picture by pressing a button on the end of a cord. Most elves will hold up a stuffed animal over the fireplace and say, "Look at my little animal friend and smile." Oftentimes, the parent will settle the child on Santa's lap and then start grooming. I've seen mothers pull cans of hairspray from their pocketbooks and spray the child's hair as if Santa were a false prop made out of cement. Hairspray shoots into Santa's eyes, and he winces in pain.

Once a child starts crying, it's all over. The parents had planned to send these pictures as cards or store them away until the child is grown and can lie, claiming to remember the experience. Tonight I saw a woman slap and shake her crying child. She yelled, "Rachel, get on that man's lap and smile, or I'll give you something to cry about." Then she sat Rachel on Santa's lap, and I took the picture, which supposedly means, on paper, that everything is exactly the way it's supposed to

be, that everything is snowy and wonderful. It's not about the child or Santa or Christmas or anything, but the parents' idea of a world they cannot make work for them.