BEHIND THE BEARD

SAMPLE CHAPTER

Secrets and Tips from The Big Guy
to Help Parents Ensure Belief!

BEHIND THE BEARD

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Behind the Beard: Secrets and Tips from The Big Guy to Help Parents Ensure Belief!

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Second Edition

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This book is dedicated
to all the children of the world,
especially those stuck in the body of a grown-up.
May the true spirit of Christmas
reside within, and radiate from, each of you.

Foreword

Do I believe in Santa Claus? You betcha, I do. Well, maybe not in the same way that a child does. I don't believe there's an 800-year-old giant elf who somehow redefines the laws of physics, space and time once a year. I mean, imagine sliding up and down millions of chimneys in a single night while keeping a beard white as snow!

But I still believe in Santa—his ability to inspire; the pure joy he brings; how he grants everyone, no matter their age, the opportunity to dream with the innocence of a child whenever he arrives. I've seen it year after year, without fail. Santa is real.

And I'm an elf! But we'll get to that later.

I met Santa for the first time back in 2002. I didn't know he was truly St. Nick at the time. His peers called him "Mo," and he was working as a cook in a restaurant. Not very Santa-like, I'm sure, although his spin on the house gorgonzola fondue could only be described as magical. He was a boisterous, fun-loving guy who was

always the life of the party. He was also quite the joker, enjoying both verbal and practical jokes. Have you ever been put into a garbage can by Santa Claus? I have! Mo was fun. There's no other way to put it.

It took me a couple years to even learn that his name wasn't Mo. It was Billy. But, hey! Who am I to question Santa?

We quickly went from acquaintances to very close friends. He was, and still is, a number of years older than I am. We didn't let that stop what would become a very meaningful and special friendship that lasts to this day.

As time moved on, I found myself living in distant corners of the country, but the friendship never faded. He would visit me and I'd see him when I returned home. Over the years, slowly, but surely, Billy began to show his Claus.

There was always something a little different about him. After all, it's not every day your softball team has a left-handed pitcher on the mound. But it went beyond that and his exuberant nature. It occurred to me one day that he was beginning to "look" like Santa. He had been known to grow out his mustache at times, and it was always very light in color. Once he even sported a look I can only describe as a "larger-than-life Hulk Hogan."

Then came the suit. He would, in fact, pretend to be Santa. I say "pretend" because that's how my naïve mind perceived it at first, when I noticed he started to "act" like Santa. Yet even without the suit, he maintained that demeanor, especially around the Christmas season.

The boisterous man I knew didn't exist during the holidays. My friend was authentically a kinder, more charitable and gentler man. This transformation is common for many during the holidays, but I quickly realized it

went well beyond that for Billy. He even traveled once all the way to Mississippi to spread some joy to southern kids one season. That's going above and beyond for the cause!

Eventually, it clicked. I was able to see past the suit into his heart and soul. I came to the astonishing conclusion that he was indeed Santa Claus. It might sound silly to you that some guy I randomly met in a kitchen and played poker and softball with would turn out to be Kris Kringle, but hear me out.

No, he doesn't live at the North Pole.

No, he doesn't fly around the world delivering gifts at a pace that defies the laws of physics. Nor does he own a reindeer, let alone nine.

But this man has proven to me time and again that he truly is the human manifestation of the spirit of Christmas. Nothing means more to him, especially around Christmas, than bringing love and joy to everyone he comes across, from stranger to best friend, from child to senior citizen. The amount of happiness I've seen him bring to people over the years is incalculable. It's an uncanny gift that could only be possessed by the true Santa Claus.

I eventually moved home and was reunited with my friend, who had changed drastically since we first met—and all for the better. Older and wiser of course and even a little bigger, naturally… This is Santa we're talking about after all! But there was also this new quality of selflessness that I didn't recall from before.

That first winter home began with a night where everything changed for me. I went to a community tree-lighting event that advertised Santa Claus himself would be there! Surely, I couldn't miss such an opportunity to

meet the real Santa. Upon his arrival, I thought something looked awfully familiar about St. Nick… The way he talked, the way he looked. To my surprise, even behind a stunning beard as white as snow, I realized who it was.

So I watched as this master of ceremonies lit the trees in the center of town to a rousing ovation by its citizens. Then every single family, one by one, went up to meet him and take a photo with the *real* Santa Claus. I was quite a distance away, admiring this from afar, hearing his "ho, ho, ho" ring out from time to time. The happiness of everyone filled the crisp New England winter air.

I wanted to go say "hi" to my friend before leaving, but the line never seemed to get any shorter, and I wasn't about to cut in front of a bunch of kids who had been waiting patiently in the cold for their turn to climb onto Santa's lap and wish for whatever it was they hoped to find under the tree Christmas morning.

But that night changed my perception. I saw Billy truly as Santa Claus.

Shortly thereafter, he brought me up to speed on the duty he has to keep the Christmas spirit alive for everyone he sees. He told me how he can give any Scrooge or Grinch a pure heart with the innocence of a child.

Christmastime is a magical time of the year. People are nicer and more charitable. But it all starts with Santa Claus, and he takes that responsibility very seriously.

Okay, so back to that thing I mentioned about me being an elf…

No, I'm not one-foot tall.

No, I don't make toys.

No, I don't have pointed ears… unless you count the prosthetics in my closet.

I became Santa's "Chief Elf" to help him spread his joy to countless others. I told him to let me handle the logistics and I would create a well-oiled sled… er, machine… so he could focus on what he does best—bringing joy into the lives of so many people. I even helped him expand a single Christmas Eve visit into an entire night's worth of visits, which have been some of the most magical moments in people's lives. I mean, what would you do if you were a kid and found Santa under the tree delivering presents at 2am on Christmas morning? That's a priceless gift that I was happy to help him bring to so many.

At the end of the day, Billy doesn't just look like Santa—he doesn't just put on a suit and parade around. He truly cares about everyone and is obligated to make every single person he meets as happy as possible.

Santa Claus isn't a once-a-year thing. The beard goes strong year 'round to the point where kids approach him in the middle of June and ask him if he's Santa. Without skipping a beat, he gives them a wink and a nod. Similarly, the kids who have seen me elf-ing with Santa have been known, on rare occasion, to call me out. I have to hide my ears to recite one of the several lines that we have for such an occasion. The kids know when they see him, even mid-summer, that they just spoke with Santa. It keeps them smiling, reminds them to stay nice, and brings a little of that Christmas magic back, even if only for a moment.

I'm not going to get into why Santa does what he does. That's for him to explain to you in this book. But know that it comes naturally and authentically. Most importantly, it comes at his own expense. It's not easy to be the most important man, or elf, in the entire world. All of his free time, and I do mean literally every single second,

goes into making others happy, even at his own expense. He gets completely run down each year because every hour of every day he's out there with the same energy, spreading love and Christmas cheer.

Trust me, when the beard is white as snow, those eyes can appear as red as Rudolph's nose! So it's my job to make sure he's taken care of because it's his job to take care of every other man, woman and child. It's an honor and a privilege for us both, but also a unique obligation with a level of importance unmatched by almost any other role in the world.

And that is no easy feat because not everybody is happy during the holidays. He's had children sit on his lap as their parents were half a world away at war. He's visited families who lost a child the week of Christmas. He's been able to absorb the sadness of others in order to bring them a glimmer of hope or happiness when they need it most. And that's the true spirit of what it means to be Santa Claus.

And what I've seen makes me believe.

Peace, love and happiness to you all, and have a very Merry Christmas.

—Myke Furhman, aka "Butters the Elf"

Preface

This book is not intended for the eyes of children. It is written for parents and grandparents, uncles, aunts and great-grandparents... It's made for family. It's the "Teacher's Edition" to Christmas, in a way. This is not an Associate's Degree for the holiday, but a simple tool to help make it a little better. This book is intended for those who believe and want to keep the magical, classic concept alive a bit longer in a world of technology and skepticism.

The wide-eyed optimism of youth fades far too quickly, and if we can work together to preserve that, to extend that belief for just a short time, then we have allowed that one childhood to be a bit happier.

We have allowed the magic of Christmas an opportunity to survive.

I was raised to believe in Santa Claus, and I still do. There was a time in my teens when, sadly, I lost that belief. It was an awful time in retrospect. But my belief

completely returned when I put on that red suit and saw myself through the eyes of children.

Santa is quite real. You simply need to know where he is and how to help deliver what he represents.

You are an elf. It's great to be an elf. Elves get to keep secrets. At times, you will be Santa too and, as long as you know when to be the right character, you're a step ahead. This book is full of secrets, and it's your duty—nay, your obligation—to preserve, execute and create great memories, and to pass along the traditions of our youth.

If you disagree with believing in Santa Claus, then stop here. You're too far gone, and I won't have it. On second thought… Stick around, I may just win you back.

In this book, I will share with you some tips to help your entire family, from eldest to youngest, make their belief even stronger. I will also share stories that have touched my heart or brought me to tears and those that made me laugh uncontrollably from my hundreds, maybe thousands, of appearances as The Big Guy. It is a story that reassures you that the spirits of Christmas and Santa Claus are both alive and quite well. I hope to show you how I see it, to help you look at it differently. If you get the privilege to see for a moment what I have seen, then you'll "get it." It is a true pleasure for me to share my experiences with you.

Chapter 1 – Being and Becoming

In a small New England town in the 1970s, a teacher informed our third-grade class that we would be performing a play for the entire school. Everyone would be there, and it would be our first chance to act on stage. At that age, there was no larger audience that you could possibly imagine.

The play was to be an adaptation of the great American poem, "'Twas the Night Before Christmas." One boy stood up, reaching as if trying to touch the ceiling tiles, and shouted, "Billy should be Santa. He has the belly already!" While kids can be cruel, it was never taken as such (I wasn't even *that* portly of a boy), and I was excited to be considered for the part. This particular role would grab hold of me for a lifetime.

My classmates were dressed as reindeer. Nine kids with paper antlers were strung to me with twine. We had cut out their antlers with those blunt-nosed scissors we used in grade school (that cut absolutely nothing).

Moreover, can I add that I'm a lefty and those "left-handed scissors" never worked at all?

Anyway… My sleigh was made of bright red cardboard accented with black and tons of glitter for that special *wow* factor. There were no amazing special effects, and our performance was held in the cafeteria of the school, still reeking of yesterday's canned green beans and sloppy joes. The beard was scratchy, the suit was too big, and I tripped over the rolled cuffs while trying to hold up a sleigh that was missing suspenders, but fit like clown pants.

It sounds like a wreck, but it was one of the coolest things I've ever done to this day. I found that I loved the spotlight and that day its fluorescent glow released my inner ham.

A classic figure in history can be played by any mediocre actor and often is. Historical or fictional characters are usually quite well-defined and only require a basic understanding of the individual; then you apply your own personal adaptation. To play Abe Lincoln, for example, you throw on the beard and top hat and you look the part. Recite the Gettysburg Address and you're off to the races. You've succeeded and will be somewhat believable.

To capture a historical figure like Daniel Day-Lewis did in the movie *Lincoln* requires a gift and a talent. It demands that you believe you are that character—that you *are* Abe—and your performance must be infused with that belief to be great at what you do. I've never spoken to the aforementioned Academy Award winner, but I believe he channeled a bit of the former president while preparing and shooting, whether he knows it or not.

My adaptation of Santa Claus is no different. It's just a role I reprise and adapt to annually. So yes, odd as it seems, I take "being Santa" as a serious thespian undertaking. I owe it to the children of the world to live up to the expectations our parents have presented to us and exceed them. The question I constantly challenge myself with is, "How do I be Santa… *better*?" You are Santa as much as I am, or at least you can be. You need to work at it too.

I am strictly the physical representation because, quite simply, I look like the guy. If I looked like Tom Selleck, I'd be doing Magnum PI spots for… Well, no one does spots for that show anymore. But you get my point. I was born with the rugged good looks of Burl Ives, Edmund Gwenn and Ed Asner. So be it. I accept it and run with it. I look like The Big Guy so I work toward perfecting the part.

At forty-eight, I am currently one of the youngest professional Santas in the country. When I first started getting paid to do this, I wore the fake scratchy beard and plastic shoe tops.

Eventually, I grew my beard and added make-up so it would appear more real. While it looked quite cartoony, it was better than before. Then, I grew my beard every year in anticipation of the season, dedicating five months to the process. Now, I keep the beard throughout the year since I run the risk of being recognized at the grocery store in the summer months.

A natural beard is key to the role. Kids spot a phony a mile away. It's hard work not shaving, but I'm getting pretty good at it. I bleach out whatever isn't already grey, although each year I need less bleach. Santa also has an excellent Brazilian-American stylist named Sergio who

works on his beard. I hope that doesn't make me a diva, but I've been called worse. Sergio is excellent at what he does, and I couldn't be a great Santa without his efforts.

This Santa is also bald. This is not strictly a Santa choice, but I do prefer the clean, polished look of a bald Santa. I also have no problem removing my hat and allowing children to see Santa without it. Many of my favorite old cartoons show Santa as bald, and those were always what I've based my look on. Does it really matter? Absolutely not! I am glad my baldness can go to some use, though.

I have multiple Santa suits in my collection these days, but to give you an idea of how they differ, I'll describe a few here.

I have a traditional suit of plush fur that I call "Fuzzy." It's just that, and I feel like a stuffed animal when I wear it. It's very warm so the mid-December outdoor appearances are far more comfortable.

I have a flat-finish suit that photographs better, but isn't as warm. That one I call "Scratchy" because it is, and I have to wear something underneath to keep it from touching my skin. It allows me a cleaning rotation as well.

Finally, I have the suit I call "Miracle." It is inspired by the movie *Miracle on 34th Street*. Miracle is a men's red suit with two-tone shoes, a gold vest, and a bowler hat. It's quite classy. This suit draws more attention than the other two combined.

I go the extra mile of re-investing in my suits each year to keep them up-to-date, ensuring they are photo--worthy, and to make sure each one still fits. Santa's "Cookie Zone" does tend to expand a bit each year. The suit is not just an identifier for the public. It's an energy given to me when I see it in the mirror.

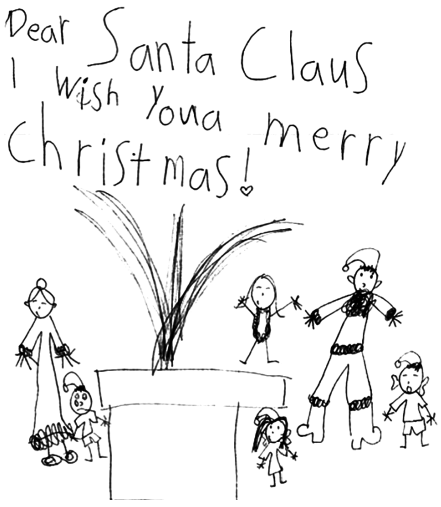
Finally, I don't wear white gloves unless I'm wearing Miracle. I believe that Santa prefers black or brown leather gloves, or even mittens. White gloves are for the bush leagues. When you go pro, you become a bit more conscious of the details. I get asked about my gloves all the time. The black gloves I wear match my black belt perfectly, and besides, who wouldn't wear leather when they're holding the reins to a sleigh?

Quick Story

A little girl bounced across the room and launched herself onto my lap. As she landed, she exclaimed, "Santa, I pooted!"

I couldn't help but laugh. Her mother was glowing with embarrassment and said, "She knows people laugh when she says that, but she didn't fart on you, I hope!"

Even if she had, it could be worse!



Why one elf is crying I'm not sure.
It looks like quite the party though!

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Praise for *Behind the Beard*

Santa Buckbee is the best! He is the true personification of the spirit of giving and kindness and love. Enjoy reading his stories of fun and kindness. There is still magic on the earth!

—Dr. William Petit
President, Petit Family Foundation
Connecticut State Representative

Bill Buckbee quite literally embodies the spirit of the season. His love of all things Christmas shines through on every page.

—Lori Capriglione, mother of 4
(including one who believed until the age of 14!)

After reading *Behind the Beard*, I can honestly say that time travel does exist. It brings you back to childhood when things were so much simpler. It reminds you of the memories you had and helps you create new memories with your family.

—Christian A. Carroccio, father of 2

A book written from the heart that inspires readers to reflect and explore their own hearts. The stories shared about a special season touched me deeply and stirred within me my inner child, reaffirming the beautiful magic that exists at Christmas time, regardless of your age.

—Deborah Rose, journalist and mother of 2

Behind the Beard is a wonderful book. Every parent should read it as it gives you insight into how to make Christmas even more special for your children! Everyone has a Santa inside of them. Thanks for reminding us of that, Bill Buckbee.

—Cathy Rehaag, mother of 3

As someone who has photographed a lot of Santas, Bill Buckbee has a most magical way of expressing the true spirit of Santa, which is enjoyed by both children and adults alike.

—Nicole Bourgeois Believe
Picture This Photography

Behind the Beard is an amazing book that brings back so many wonderful memories of my childhood. Not only does it bring back memories, but it also sparks the old-time Christmas spirit, bringing out the child in your heart who still lives.

—Tricia Peburn, mother of 3