

WEARING THE BEARD

A holiday story for friends and family

by Bo Wilson

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Everybody comes to it their own way, for their own reasons.

It can be an impulse, or a carefully crafted plan, or a family tradition. It can be just for a single year, or it can be every year for your whole life.

Maybe you need a temporary gig to make the rent. Maybe you volunteer, out of love for the season. A few times, it's been people who were on the run from something, needing a way to hide.

The why of it never really matters as long as you know what it means to wear the beard.

It doesn't come with instructions. Sometimes there's an interview, but that might be a bored night manager who doesn't say anything except "sign here." It might be a nervous director of HR explaining how important it is that respect your co-workers, even though there won't be any. Maybe it'll be some nameless drone, coffee stained, smoker's cough, talking to five or six of you at once, assigning you all to various corners or storefronts, making sure that the right spots are covered.

None of them will really explain anything to you. They probably couldn't even if they wanted to.

But sometimes you'll get a visit from a small, slim person of uncertain gender, with eyes as big and bright as any owl's, ears that seem just the slightest bit pointed. Anything they tell you is worth remembering. They're here straight from The Saint himself.

That's just one name for him, The Saint. He's got a lot of names; you stick around long enough in any racket, you end up with a list of names. Chris, aka Kris, aka Nick, aka Father, aka—and this is the big one the last hundred years or so-- Santa. He stays up north most of the year, but he's got people everywhere, and those people bring on other people, and if you find yourself doing this, guess what? *You're* one of his people now. You put on the beard, you're his.

That's not a bad thing, not at all. It's good. You could say it's the whole *point* of the thing, the *reason* for the thing. The beard, yes, and the suit, and the bell. They mean you're one of his, and that's a good thing to be, but they mean more, too. They mean that sometimes, you *are* him.

Look, it's complicated. I can't explain how any of it works, you understand? But you've heard the questions. Some curious kid looks around, sees one beard on the corner, sees another one inside the store across the street, what gives, right? They're not both him, right? And then mom or dad or Aunt Becky or whoever says "No, they're his helpers," and the kid nods and acts like that's an answer, except deep down the kid knows it's not really a *good* answer. They can *feel* that it's not right, because it isn't. At least not all the way. Because yes, we *are* helpers, I guess, it's as good a word as anything, but... like I say, sometimes, we're not just helping him. *We are* him.

You'll feel it when it happens. It doesn't last long, probably just a second or two, I can't be sure, maybe even less. But it doesn't matter, because while it's happening, time is different. *Really* different. Or, I don't know, maybe even just missing altogether. Timelessness.

You're standing there, ringing your bell, ho-ho-ho-ing, greeting the season, wondering when your toes will ever be warm again and then, out of nowhere, everything changes. The world gets brighter, and still, and silent Listen to the carols, there are clues in all those lyrics, "making spirits bright," "all is calm," it's all there. And in that calm, you see things you don't usually see.

You see people's hearts.

You see all the human conditions. You see love, kind of like a warm bubble around a person, sometimes small, just around a mother and her children, sometimes huge, reaching out to encompass everyone as far as you can see. You see laughter and excitement and happiness and all the things that add up to what you could call joy. A lot of times the people don't seem really aware of this stuff, but sometimes you catch sight of a bright, shining gratitude, someone who knows how lucky they are.

And you see the other side of the coin, too. You see shadows of worry, about money, about family. You see loneliness, people who don't quite know how to connect themselves to the goodness around them, or who miss a particular person so much that it's all they can feel. Sometimes you see a gleam that you know is predatory, someone looking to take advantage of that worry and that loneliness.

You see everything, including all the things that you might do. Maybe you see how you could nudge that bubble of love over just a little bit, so that it includes the lonely guy, and now the predator has no prey because the lonely guy isn't lost in sorrow anymore, he's aware of the world again. You can tell that worried person she's doing great, and you can give a wink and a nod to the man who knows his good fortune, because when someone else recognizes your luck and smiles at it, it's easy to give it away. A simple smile can encourage the generosity of the time.

You see all of this in an instant.

And then the world goes back to how it was, except never all the way, not really. Some things, once you see them, you can't unsee them. Especially the ways you can help. When the Saint of All Giving looks through your eyes, he's only there for a second, but even after he leaves, your eyes remember what he helped you see.

It's why we wear the beard. Not just to help him, but for that endless moment of *being* him.

I'll tell you something else, too: Once the Saint has looked out through your eyes? You remember what you saw all year long, and you see all the things you can do. All the ways to help.

So, here. Here's your bell, your suit's in the locker, and the beard is with it.

Wear it with pride. And hey?

Merry Christmas.