

Will the real Santa Claus please stand up?

Gabrielle Chariton discovers Santa's rather horrifying penchant for the good life.

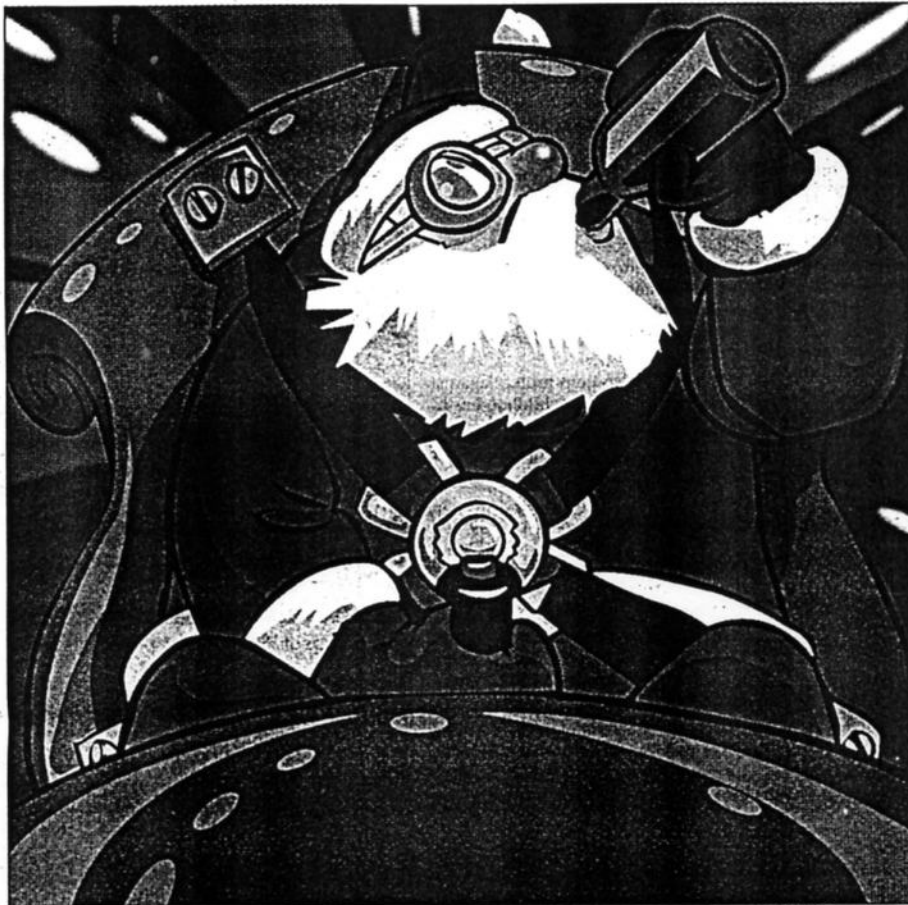
HE'S fat, gets about in the middle of summer in a fur-lined suit, and devotes his life to making the world's children happy. He rarely replies to our letters, only visits when we're asleep and (almost) always eats the milk and biscuits we leave out for him. And that's about all we know of the elusive gift-giver called Santa Claus.

One balmy evening late last week, I was lucky enough to encounter Santa as he took a bit of well-earned R & R in one of Canberra's watering holes. After a few friendly bevvies, he was more than happy to spill all his secrets.

Santa was full of surprises: not quite the twinkling-eyed, merry simpleton of my childhood imaginings. Was he jolly? Yes (especially by the time he left). Opinionated? Surprisingly so. Gentlemanly? Well, let's just say Mrs Claus shouldn't let him stay out so late.

There's no prizes for guessing that Santa is very, very old. What you might not know is that he's still capable of knocking tequilas back with the best of them (although he betrayed his seniority when he complained about the "damned doof doof noise" that filled the bar).

"I was born in the fourth century," he told me, through a mouthful of peanuts. "Although I live in the North Pole, I grew up in a part of the world that is now Turkey. I used to travel around giving gifts to needy children. I came to be known as Saint Nicholas, and - bless them - they made me the patron saint of children and sailors."



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When he was still fairly young, Santa inherited a fortune from his father, which he generously used to help poor children. Apparently he possessed many magical qualities, and credits himself with saving a few children's lives. ("But I'm a bit old to be doing much of that these days," he added.)

Once the stuff of religious legends, Santa, although still somewhat magical, is no longer revered as a saint.

Today, his realm is purely commercial.

"My name is actually an Americanisation," he said. "The Dutch called me Sinter Nikolaas, which, over the years, was shortened to Sinter Klaas. Santa Claus is the rather crass American pronunciation."

And, worst of all according to Santa, his current image - rotund, jolly and hirsute - was designed by artist Haddon Sundblom for

Coca-Cola advertisements in 1931. "I wish he'd made me a tad smaller - it gets a bit squeazy coming down those chimneys, and damned hot when the fire's lit!"

After his fifth tequila, Santa finally revealed the stunning facts behind his annual Christmas Eve marathon.

"I deliver gifts to 156 million different homes across the world," he said. "Now, my main problem

is that I cannot arrive until children are asleep, so I start distributing presents in each time zone at around 9pm local time (when all good children should be asleep). I have to finish that time zone within one hour, then I start on the one immediately to the west.

"Basically, I have about 31 hours to finish all my deliveries," he bragged, crimson gin blossoms spreading across his cheeks.

I did some quick maths in my head. This means that Santa visits 1398 homes per second; he has just 715 microseconds in which to slow down the sleigh, land on the roof, squeeze down the chimney, leave the presents, devour the milk and biscuits (though he said he actually prefers a well-aged scotch), and return to the sleigh. I gazed admiringly at this tubby man in front of me, thinking he must be extremely fit for his age.

"I travel a long way every Christmas Eve," he continued, blustering. "111 million miles, in fact - even longer than the distance from the earth to the sun."

He mopped his sweat-beaded brow. I reached for another drink - barely coping just hearing about it.

"The average speed of the sleigh - about 3.6 million miles an hour - is fast enough to get to the moon in about four minutes."

He flopped back in his chair, proudly chuckling to himself. Magical? This Coca-Cola creation defies the imagination!

And how does he know who's been naughty or nice?

"Well, sweetie," - with a slightly lascivious wink - "that's a secret."

I pushed the point. "What about me? Have I been naughty or nice?" I enquired. Would he know?

He leaned over and drunkenly whispered in my ear: "Ho ho ho".

I don't think I'll be getting that new Mercedes this year.

* Statistics about Santa's Christmas Eve jaunt supplied by www.religioustolerance.org

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