

# Peter Gilstrap

**"What good would it do to bury a seriously deteriorated skeleton in an unmarked grave when we could leave him here to lift people's spirits?"**

## The Case of the Disarming Santa

**At Christmastime, it's best to leave well-enough alone. Even when a bone is discovered inside a stuffed, storefront Claus**

Like so many others at this time of year, I have a warm, happy feeling.

I don't know, maybe it's the wonderful scent of burning wood that's in the crisp, wintry air. Maybe it's the way everybody seems to be wearing a big Christmas smile, the way good cheer and happiness seem to be all around us, like a fine, exotic perfume that we can only wear once a year.

Of course, it's because of all of these things that I feel so good, yet—on this particular holiday season—there's a little something extra that I'd like to share with you: a story.

Christmas is filled with stories, from the amazing birth of sweet Baby Jesus in His humble manger to *A Visit From Saint Nick (The Night Before Christmas)* to even *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians*! But the story I'd like to share with you didn't happen 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem, or in a Victorian writer's mind, or even on the planet Mars.

It took place just a few days ago, right here in our own city. It's a story about people and feelings and Christmas. And people's Christmas feelings. And, most of all, it's about Santa.

We see Santas everywhere at this time of year: featured on TV commercials, on street corners ringing bells for charity, pictured beaming from cards and wrapping paper, in department stores welcoming thrilled youngsters to their laps of red for a quick snapshot.

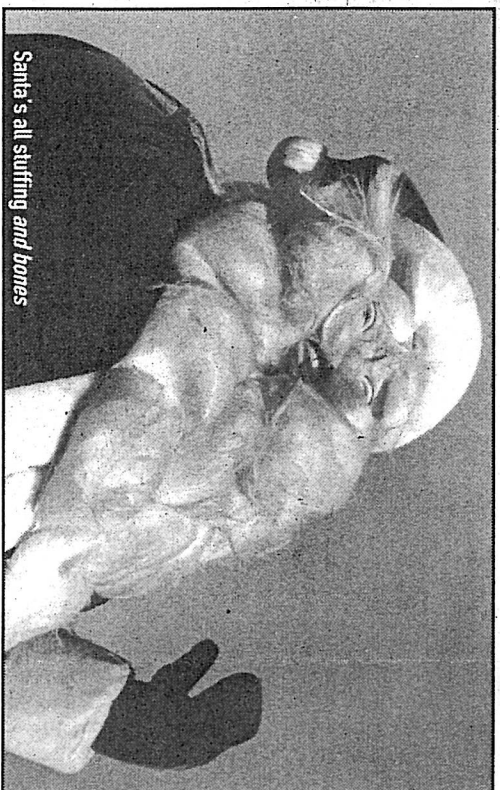
But this story is about a very special Santa indeed.

Every Christmas, thousands of Angelenos drive past Slacks n' Such on Laird Avenue downtown. And, for some 25 seasons now, those busy shoppers have delighted in glimpsing a certain Santa Claus standing in front of the store, gleefully waving a Christmas greeting to one and all.

The fact that this Santa is mechanical doesn't matter a bit. The bright red suit, the thick, snowy beard that almost obscures his permanent grin, the constant back-and-forth wave of his raised left arm; these things have made this robotic Claus a beloved holiday landmark.

"Merry Christmas!" he seems to be saying to one and all.

Until last week, when this particular Santa provided a little holiday surprise of his own.



Santa's all stuffing and bones

Slacks n' Such owner Vince Melb was busy opening the store one morning; he takes up

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the story.

"All I did was, I took Santa out front, and plugged him in as usual. I was trying to move him over, just adjust him a little, pulling on him like I always do. That's when his arm came off." Melb shudders, and is silent for a few seconds, his hand frozen in a demonstrative pulling gesture. "At first I thought, 'Oh no. I've got to put this arm back on here somehow.'"

But, as the cheery, one-armed Santa continued his mechanized swiveling, Melb looked a little closer at the velvet-clothed appendage in his hand.

There was a bone sticking out of it.

A humerus bone, to be exact, whose job it is to connect the human arm with the human shoulder. Indicating that beneath the fading suit and dusty beard, this Santa was something more than just plywood, stuffing, and a cheap electric motor.

"I took a good look at Santa's face," Melb continues. "I guess I've lugged him around for years, but I'd never really paid much attention to what he looked like up close. I always thought his face was sort of waxy, kind of plasticity, but all of a sudden, you know, it looked different. Like skin, but dried up and old. I'd say, yeah, pretty much dried up, old, bad skin that had been stuffed or something. And stretched into a smile."

Los Angeles Police Department Detective Phillip McKreviss has been on the Holiday Task Force for almost three decades. In that time, he's seen more than his share of seasonal crime. Thanksgiving turkey theft, eggnog related domestic situations, the bogus sparkler incident that stunned locals on the Fourth of July a few years back, and the infamous 1982 dreidel hijacking that involved a stolen truckload of thousands of the Hebrew tops.

His is not a pretty job, but an essential

with a bone poking out. I've dealt with some strange cases at Christmas-time, even a couple Nativity crime scenes that would curl your ears to hear about 'em, but..." McKreviss's voice trails off as he shakes his head.

"What's more, I've driven by this Santa for a damn long time. He always appeared to be your nice, average, mechanical Santa."

**"I'll tell you what, we don't even have a radio code for 'mummified human remains dressed in Santa suit.'"**

After briefly questioning Melb, McKreviss determined that the bewildered men's clothing was not involved in any Kringle-related criminal activity.

"It was obvious to me that this body had been dead for quite a lengthy period of time," the detective offers, regaining his tough-guy composure. "And I could see no outward signs of violence, beyond minimal wear and tear to the red Santa suit and basic scuffing of the black Santa boots. But this is normal stress in a mechanical waving Santa of this age."

The next move was to call in the Yuletide Forensics Division, a Task Force branch team of highly trained experts in Christmas-related medical situations. L.A.'s Yuletide lab specialists gained national attention in the late '80s when they were able to trace wool fibers (from a red stocking badly damaged by a viscous substance later revealed to be of the Hershey family) to the van of a deranged serial elf.

Soon the parking lot of Slacks n' Such was crawling with police personnel.

"I was really impressed with these guys, doing tests and taking samples and everything; there must have been 20 of them out here," says Melb. "All I

knew about the Santa was that he'd been in storage in the back of the store when I bought it, so I started putting him out at Christmas every year. He just looked like a dummy Santa to me, and he certainly had no bad odor or anything."

Yuletide Forensics Chief Madge Hamilton was in charge of the investigation.

"We performed the usual beard-sample tests that indicated the hairs were of an early latex derivative common to stage beards in use from the turn of the century up until roughly 1930," she explains. "The body itself had been crudely embalmed, the skin treated with Mediterranean beeswax, the organs removed, and larger cavities stuffed with cedar chips that provided not only the necessary rigidity, but emitted a rather pleasing, old-fashioned, Christmasy smell."

The men and women of the Holiday Task Force are nothing if not professional, but

that doesn't mean they haven't got hearts beating under their severe, holly-colored uniforms. As a matter of fact, all of the cops I spoke with were clearly affected by the strange case of this much-loved local Santa.

"I've been passing by this Santa, watching him do his little wave thing since I was a kid," one officer, who asks not to be identified, says. "It wasn't an easy thing to take, seeing the arm

with that bone coming out and thinking there's a real person in there. Lots of us, I think, really had a lot of affection for him, and to consider having to unplug him, stop the waving, take off that nice red suit and open him up to, well...no one wants to think of the Slacks n' Such Santa as human remains."

The world is full of a lot of things that aren't very nice. As the days and the months roll by, all of us are subjected to unpleasantness, pain, hurt, and turmoil. But there's one magical time each year when the suffering can be put aside, when humankind—when Angeleno-kind—can come together in a mood of happiness and hope.

And that time is Christmas. Some say miracles are allowed to happen then, and, if not miracles, then maybe a few rules and regulations and other such seriousness can be put aside to let dreams survive.

"We all got to thinking," says Detective McKreviss, absent-mindedly rubbing the big brass buckle on his big black belt. "This Santa is important to folks, to kids, you know? He's like a traditional reminder that Christmas really means something here, and why take that away from everyone? So there's an old corpse in that Santa suit—people die every day, but Christmas comes but once a year. That's something special."

Forensics boss Hamilton agrees.

"Judging from our findings, the body is a John Doe from as far back as the early 1900s, before consistent dental records were kept," she reasons. "We could perform an autopsy, do elaborate tests to make some attempt to ID him—all at taxpayer expense—but I really doubt we'd have any kind of success. And what good would it do to bury a seriously deteriorated skeleton in an unmarked grave when we could leave him here to lift people's spirits. It's Santa, for goodness sake!"

And thus it was that last Thursday the whole department of the LAPD Holiday Task Force joined in and, using high-tech bone wire and the most advanced medical epoxies, put Santa Claus back together again.

So if you find yourself driving down Laird Avenue in the next few days and you pass by Slacks n' Such, take a look in the parking lot. There won't be an empty spot where a jolly fellow with a happy greeting once stood. As usual, Santa Claus will be there to give a wave to you this Christmas. And, thanks to a few friendly officers who believed a man in a red suit is a little more important than a bunch of red tape, Old Saint Nick will be on hand to offer his merry gesture of joy to your children, and their children, too. **TM**

December 25-31, 1997