

A LESSON IN PROPER  
BOW-FLUFFING TECHNIQUE

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A Solo Play in One Act

by

Trey Nichols

(EXCERPT)

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Scene

The Customer Service department and other locations in a large department store.

Time

December. The present.

(HE walks downstage and addresses the audience.)

Most malls have a big holiday stage set up in December where kids go sit on Santa's lap and get their pictures taken. Our store has a special one-day event called "Santa in the Window."

(HE goes to Santa's chair at stage right, repositioning it and checking the general Santa area.)

We clear out the space inside one of our big outdoor display windows and set up a small living room for Santa. There's a fireplace with stockings hung, a fully decorated Christmas tree surrounded by lots of big shiny presents, and of course, Santa's chair. It's cramped but cozy.

The children line up inside the store and are led one by one through a dressing room, up some steps to a small doorway, then out into the display area to sit on Santa's lap. Santa is wired with a hidden microphone, so that all the parents--and anyone else who happens to be outside the window watching--can hear each child's private conversation with Santa, giving the whole operation the flavor of a festive holiday FBI sting.

But don't get me wrong. "Santa in the Window" is a hugely popular event--mostly for the parents. All the mommies and daddies love to "ooh" and "ahh" and tap on the window and take pictures and videos. But the children are mostly dazed and disoriented. They can't quite handle the abrupt transition from department store dressing room to Santa's living room, with all the bright lights shining in their eyes and those strange faces staring at them through the glass.

"Santa in the Window" is run by the Customer Service department in rotating shifts of two, and this year I'm on the first shift. I get to manage the long line of parents and children, while one of my co-workers takes the free Polaroids.

A few minutes into my Santa shift, as I'm ready for the next child, I notice a short middle-aged woman, slightly stooped and squinting, standing at the front of the line. She's wearing an old overcoat and sneakers and clutching a well-worn handbag.

(HE crosses downstage left to greet the woman at the front of the line.)

She smiles excitedly as I go to greet her and just starts talking. "My Stephanie loves Santa in the Window. We come every year. It's all she's been talking about for weeks!" But I don't see any little girl nearby. So I say, "Um, so where is Stephanie? Is she ready?"

“Oh, yes! She’s just straightening her hair. She’ll be right back.”

“Okay, well, we have kind of a long line here, should I take someone else first?”

Then the lady turns around and scans the crowd. “Oh no, here she comes now.” I look around...but I still don’t see any little girl!

Then I meet Stephanie.

Stephanie is about six-foot-seven and built like a linebacker. She looks to be in her early twenties, but her sweet, eager expression indicates the mind of a child. She smiles down at me, teeth like a car crash, eyes wide, glistening, she can barely keep them in her head she’s so excited, shifting from foot to foot, her hands hanging like baseball mitts.

“Hi, Stephanie. Are you ready to see Santa?” She nods. “Okay then. Let’s go see Santa.”

(HE takes Stephanie’s hand and crosses to center stage.)

Stephanie takes my hand--her grip is surprisingly gentle--as I lead her into Santa’s living room; she has to lower her head to squeeze through the doorway. Both Santa and Polaroid Girl seem startled as Stephanie follows me in, and the crowd outside the window takes a step back. “Santa,” I say, “this is Stephanie. She’s come to tell you what she wants for Christmas.”

Now Santa goes pale and seems to actually shrink into his beard. Polaroid Girl looks like she’s waiting for a punch line. But Stephanie knows exactly what to do--she heads straight for Santa. He manages a decent “ho ho ho” that ends in a wheezy gurgle as she settles into his lap. When Santa asks her if she’s been a good girl this year, Stephanie nods shyly and lowers her eyes. Then she softly begins to recite her list of Christmas wishes, which she knows by heart.

(Small pause. HE watches Stephanie for a moment, then is distracted by some people in the crowd.)

A few people outside the window snicker and point, and I wish...I wish I could just rip out the hidden microphone, close the curtains, and let Stephanie have this private moment with Santa. But I can’t. I’m Santa’s helper!

Finally, Stephanie’s finished. Polaroid Girl takes the picture, and Santa gives Stephanie a candy cane, which she accepts like a religious object.

(HE crosses from Santa's chair to downstage left with Stephanie.)

I lead Stephanie back out to her mother, who thanks me many times, and reminds Stephanie to thank me too, which she does. "You're welcome. Merry Christmas!"

(HE sees them off, then turns to the crowd.)

"Okay! Who's next in line to see Santa?!"

Then, about five minutes later, I hear a voice: "Hey Mister! Mister!" It's Stephanie's mother, waving the Polaroid. "The picture didn't come out!"

(HE takes the Polaroid, studies it.)

Well, it came out all right. It shows a slightly dazed-looking Santa Claus, his gold spectacles knocked askew, and on his lap...an enormous, headless Stephanie, cut off right at the neck. "Let me see what I can do..." The line of parents and children stretches off endlessly.

(HE takes a moment to make his decision, then addresses the crowd.)

"Uh, folks?! Folks, we have a kind of special situation here! It's going to be just a couple minutes!"

(HE ushers Stephanie back to Santa's living room.)

A few of the parents glare at me as I lead Stephanie back in to see Santa. "Santa, we need to reshoot!" I put Stephanie in a number of different positions, back on Santa's lap, standing behind his chair, sitting on the floor between his knees. Finally, we get the perfect pose: Stephanie down on one knee at Santa's side, leaning in. Click! I lead Stephanie back out to her mother, who thanks me again, "You're welcome, merry Christmas," and off they go. "Okay, who's next in line to see Santa?!"

But then, five minutes later: "Hey, Mister! Mister!" Now what?!

Stephanie's mother shows me the second picture.

(HE takes the Polaroid and studies it.)

Well this time Santa and Stephanie were both in the frame, but Stephanie's face was out of the light, it's just a dark smudge with two pinprick eyes.

Now the people in line look really irritated. Some of the parents are murmuring among themselves. Stephanie's mother looks at me imploringly.

(HE starts to protest, then catches sight of Stephanie.)

Then I see Stephanie, standing off to the side, this enormous girl in her bright red holiday sweater, staring down at the floor, holding her candy cane to her chest. And I have to make this work. I have to! “Okay, Stephanie, we’re gonna do this one more time, and this time we are going to get it right!”

I bring Stephanie back in to see Santa, get them back in position, make sure they’re in the light, they’re ready, the camera’s ready, I’m ready! Click!

It is the perfect shot.

But this time as I lead Stephanie back out to her mother, I see the store manager near the front of the line, talking with some of the parents. When he sees me, he comes over and pulls me aside, looking agitated. “Why is the line to see Santa moving so slowly?”

“I had a little problem. That lady.”

“You mean the one with the big retarded daughter?”

“Um, yeah.”

“Are they regular customers?”

“I don’t know. They didn’t have shopping bags.”

Then he nods slightly and lowers his head, like he’s invoking some secret retail wisdom. “It’s important that we employ good judgement in situations that require prioritizing.”

“Um...right. But I thought part of our basic philosophy was to take care of one customer at a time.”

“Right, right, right, I’m just saying, it’s important to use good judgement.” Then he motions toward the long line of people waiting to see Santa. “We always need to stay focused on the big picture, hm?”

“Right! Right. Absolutely. Oh and by the way, she’s not ‘retarded,’ she’s developmen--” But he’s already slipped off into the crowd.

Having gotten the message, I hustle the kids along, things are finally moving at a brisk pace...but then, five minutes later: “Hey, Mister! Mister!”

I think about the store manager's words; and this time as Stephanie and her mother approach, they seem...freakish. Demanding. Impossible! Unlike these good shoppers and their children who for the most part have been waiting very patiently behind the velvet rope. I steel myself.

"Hey Mister!"

"Ma'am, I'm sorry..."

"But Mister--"

"No, I'm sorry, you're really going to have to go to the back of the line this time. These people--you see these people?--they've been standing here for hours. You can't just--"

"But Mister, I just wanted to thank you again. The picture came out great!"

"Oh. Well, good. I'm glad. Merry Christmas. Who's next in line?"

But she just won't quit!

"Hey, Mister. Have you got a sweetheart? Stephanie wants to know if you've got a sweetheart."

"Yes!" I lie, "Who's next? You?!"

"Well, Stephanie has a present for you to give your sweetheart."

"W-what?"

At her mother's prompting, Stephanie steps forward and holds out a small white box.

"She won it in a raffle, but she has one just like it. Go ahead, Stephanie, show him what it is."

Stephanie carefully lifts the lid of the box, revealing a sparkly, plastic brooch in the shape of a Christmas tree.

"Isn't it pretty? You can give it to your sweetheart."

"Oh no. I couldn't. Really."

But now Stephanie seems confused. She looks toward her mother, who grabs my hand.

"Oh please, Mister, you've been so nice to Stephanie. It would mean so much."

(HE brusquely accepts the gift from Stephanie.)

“All right. Thank you! Merry Christmas!”

(HE turns quickly, bending down to the next child in line.)

“Okay, are you ready to see Santa?”

(HE pauses, then rises to address the audience.

But now I wish I were the one going to see Santa.

(Through the following HE walks toward Santa’s chair and sits.)

I’d slither out of my body, crawl across the floor of that fake living room, climb into his lap. He’ll ask me if I’ve been a good boy. And leaning into his microphone, which will amplify every word to all those strange faces pressed against the glass, I’ll say: “No Santa. I’ve been an asshole.”