

## Behind the Book - The Secret Life of Mrs. Claus

Notes from Author Carly Alexander

### About Santaland...

“You’ll shoot your eye out!”

Who could forget the warning of the department store Santa when a kid asks for a beebe gun in the classic Christmas film, A Christmas Story. Not the most warm and fuzzy guy, that particular St. Nick, but I recently met a kind Santa at the Manhasset, New York, Lord and Taylor who seemed remarkably real, long white beard, jelly belly and all, and he seemed to enjoy having my friend and me on his lap for a few giddy moments.

While shopping with friends we came upon the Santaland on the ninth floor at Macy’s flagship store in Herald Square, New York. Although there were no kids with us, we waited in line just to have a peek at kids visiting with Santa. (This was where I learned the one-line-branching-off-to-many-Santas-in-separate-rooms method.)

Two years ago in the Christmas section at Bloomingdales there was a Santa tucked way at the back of the store in a big red velvet chair. Since it was the middle of a workday (and why wasn’t I working? Shh!) there were no children in sight, and he seemed eager to strike up a conversation with my sister and me. He told us we were never too old to talk with Santa, and I imagined my chatty Patty friend engaging him in conversation for hours. This Santa seemed young, patient as a good therapist and kind of cute under that white trim. He got me thinking...and the character of Nick began to form in my mind.

All those Santas from store to store, makes a wise guy wonder which one is real?

The Meier and Frank Department Store chain announced that 2004 would be the last year they would have a Santaland in their Portland store. A friend reported that my favorite Herald Square shopping mecca had no Santaland in 2004 – unverified, but frightening. If this trend persists, perhaps I’ll lead the charge to open up Santalands staffed by Mrs. Claus.

She bakes delicious cookies, and who better to lead children to the spirit of Christmas than a woman? She's got my vote.

### **Hangin' in Baltimore...**

My mother raised five children in the suburbs of Maryland. When we were finished with college she and my step-father Tom sold the suburban homestead and purchased a two-hundred year old townhouse in the Butcher's Hill section of Baltimore. The neighborhood was on the brink of change, and the house they were interested in was abandoned, used by addicts as a shooting gallery. I remember climbing the fire escape along the back before the contractors had started renovating to peer in the back windows at shattered plaster, peeling wallpaper and layers of linoleum – very scary.

Thank God for contractors.

A renovation was already in progress, but they got in at an early enough stage to make some changes, remove a rental unit that would have removed guest room space for me and my siblings (yikes!) and a spiral staircase that would have sucked up half the kitchen. Within a year, the house was rebuilt inside with new wiring, plumbing, walls, etc. The builder was able to spare the wide-plank wood floor, the original bannister and my mother had a stained glass piece made to fit the half-moon window over the front door. Today, it's a gem of a Victorian with all the conveniences of internet access and central air.

My mother and her husband embraced Baltimore, joining the neighborhood association, leading Butcher's Hill house tours, volunteering at the Walters Gallery, the Patterson Park Pagoda, the neighborhood watch, the sail club in the inner harbor. It was through my mother and Tom's involvement and passion for this community that I came to know and love Baltimore, a place we'd hurried through with curious looks at the formstone facades in my childhood years.

Having Liv go home to Baltimore in the first novella of THE SECRET LIFE OF MRS. CLAUS was a joy for me. It gave me yet one more excuse to visit the Aquarium, stroll the inner harbor, walk through Little Italy as garlic and butter filled the air. It gave me a chance to learn a little more about the

architecture of Baltimore, and I enjoyed the opportunity to see this reborn city through Liv's eyes.

### *Kickin with the Rockettes...*

Okay, hard to believe but my step-brother's cousin is actually dancing with the Rockettes at Radio City, swept from her parents' home in Arkansas to the big bad city. When I learned this, I knew that impossible dreams could come true and that I had to write a character who had appeared in this awesome spectacle.

Even better, when I checked the Rockettes' website I learned that anyone can audition, as long as you're at least 18 years old, between 5'7" and 5'10 ½" and proficient in tap and jazz. I'm not tall enough – as if! – but it's nice to know that the kids I see dancing in the local high school musical have a shot at dancing in the march of the wooden soldier in a few years. Isn't that great! I love America!

### *Seventh Grade Sweeties...*

I was probably a good fifty pages into the first draft of THE NUTCRACKER when I realized there was no love interest in sight for Olivia. Panic time. Although a happy-ending romance is not a requirement of chicklit novels, it has always been a personal preference of mine, and I couldn't imagine Olivia ending her story alone.

Reality to the rescue. A few years ago while visiting Baltimore I reconnected with one of my first boyfriends, who had evolved into a writer/freelancer for the Baltimore Sun. He took me to dinner in a small Greek restaurant in Greek Town, and when the owner asked about me, he bragged that I was his seventh grade sweetie. I was touched, and that memory saved me when I was struggling to dream up a decent man to save Olivia from a future with "Booby." Ralphie and I spent that evening talking about the directions our lives had gone in, our priorities, our regrets. He's a true Baltimore writer. He creates gorgeous pieces about the people and history and culture of Baltimore. So while my fiction veers from reality, the essence of Woody, his attachment and connection to Baltimore, was inspired by my buddy Raphael Alvarez.

## **Building a Better Mousetrap...**

There is something so wrong about a poorly depicted child in fiction, and I do hope that I nailed Cassie's son Tyler as a believable character. His fascination with the mouse and his attempt to build a humane mousetrap were based on some little visitors we had in the pantry of our basement in the New York house. Don't ask me how it happened, but by the time I discovered the mice they'd eaten through an entire bag of Tootsie Rolls and left the wrappers curled neatly in a heap on the floor. I assumed the kids had been hiding in the pantry and scarfing candy on the sly. I mean, really, what kind of tiny creature can consume that much chewy chocolate-y taffy?

Apparently, New York City mice dig their Tootsies.

We tried humane methods. Cage and glue pots. My son built numerous Road Runner and Coyote contraptions meant to lure the mouse under a box with cheese or Tootsie Roll bait. The mice took the bait, but eluded capture.

Unfortunately, our ending wasn't so environmentally friendly, as we had to resort to conventional traps. My son was heartbroken, but resolved to build that mousetrap that would save future mice from the snap of the trap.

## **Window Dressing**

It's not as easy as it looks, filling those windows with an appealing display. Years ago when I worked for a downtown publisher the word was out to avoid a particular local Chinese restaurant as a dead cockroach lay, feelers up, amid the plant and menu display. Yuck!

On the opposite end of the spectrum are the Manhattan department stores. It's a blast to walk around New York City during the holidays and check out the window displays at department stores. Lord & Taylor is without a doubt the best, with its moving figurines, usually set in tiny Victorian villages decked and trimmed for Christmas. Ice skaters on a pond, children riding a horse-drawn sleigh...utterly charming and worth the wait in the cues that form outside the store.

It's not easy to build a display...think of creating a life-size snowstorm diorama with Q-tips and cotton balls. Some people have the knack – you

know who you are, all those who have rows of open shelves in your living room with artfully placed candles, statues and books, unlike the clutter of board games, bills, mittens and rubber bands behind my closed cabinet doors.

I thought it would be fun to give Cassie the job of a window dresser, also in charge of the store design. Of course, I didn't want to make it too easy on her, so she was forced to work with a limited budget and aging decorations.

### *The magic of a department store...*

One summer while I was in college I worked in retail, and after I got over the sore feet I realized I loved the store before hours, when quiet reigns over racks of merchandise, corduroy blazers, print blouses and sporty slacks calling out for release. "Get me outta here and let's have some fun!" I remember wondering where these lucky clothes would land, the lives they'd have, the tales they could tell when they reached Goodwill or the rag bag.

And then there's the furniture section where you can choose a different living room every day, from contemporary to pub-style leather to Louis XV. On a tired day I still love to collapse in a cushy department store couch and regroup my thoughts.

Let's not forget the mattress and bedding section. Plush. Firm. Extra plush. Extra firm. Name your pleasure.

With the unusual fantasy of being trapped in a department store at night in mind, I approached writing the MRS. CLAUS stories. I knew that I wanted a store with a warm family tradition, and the Rossman family seemed perfect with its "Retail Darling" couple Karl and Evelyn Rossman. Let me tell you, it was hard to let them go, difficult for me to strand poor Meredith without a support system, but, as they say, it all worked out in the end. I think Karl and Evie would be proud.