## A Christmas Story-

## Stay with Santa Claus

(FAIRBANKS-Once again Charles J. Keim, professor of English and journalism at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, has written a Christmas story for the university to offer to the news media for use in Christmas time editions of newspapers and magazines and newscasts by radio and television stations.)

Copyright 1975
By CHARLES J. KEIM
Santa Claus First Floor looked through his wire rimmed lensless spectacles at the large wall clock fully 350 feet across the highly decorated department store.
"Twenty minutes to 11 ," he mumbled aloud through his cotton beard and great mustache. No one would hear him above the now clearly audible Christmas songs over the loudspeakers as the hordes of late Christmas Eve shoppers dwindled to only a few dozen.
The children still were there, but not in the long, seemingly endless lines he had listened to
for the past two weeks. Instead, they were standing expectantly yet somewhat tired in an irregular semi-circle below his small platform. He stood, stretched, boomed his yawn in an expansive "ho ho ho" and momentarily patted his huge pillowed belly back into a balanced shape. Two mothers were bending over their youngsters, trying to get them to form a line. The women, too, had seen the clock. Santa soon would be leaving, they warned, to begin his journey to homes across the world.
Seven more, Santa Claus First Floor calculated. If no more would arrive, he could handle all these and have a few minutes of rest before he'd have completed this seasonal job which had offered both disguise and excuse to stay in town before he'd. . . Well, before he'd what? He sat down.

Mechanically he listened to the first two children. "I want. . ." and "I want...." How these words had dinned
into his mind with growing intensity the past few days. "I want. ..." "I want. ..." "I want.... One of the two mothers raised her camera. The sudden flare of the flashbulb startled him from his reverie. He'd grown accustomed to these flashes, too, which were disruptive of the neat balancing act he'd developed to respond ever more mechanically to the ceaseless "I wants. ..." while pondering more deeply his own situation since he and Laurie had separated.
"You're so selfish, so utterly selfish," she'd said at last, her mouth trembling as she did so. As he'd left the apartment that night without saying goodbye to their little Joanie, those words had followed him out of the door and throughout his aimless wanderings until he'd taken the Santa Claus job: Laurie had continued to run their accounting office which increasingly had become her responsibility anyway as he'd begun spending less time there and at their apartment, too.
"I want...." This youngster was more insistent, tapping him on his pillowed chest to make him more attentive to her request only for a dolly that could do most everything, a new coat for mommie and a snowmachine for daddy.
"We'll see what we can do." Santa re-enforced the standard noncommital promise with the candy cane while the mother took one more flashlight picture which hit him right in the eyes as he looked up once more to read the clock and weigh the time against the remaining children. But now there were six instead of five. The latecomer was slightly taller than the others and looking alternately at him and at the slim retreating figure of the woman who evidently had brought her there.
"I want. ..." number one of the remaining six said. And "I want. ..." said numbers five, four and three. "I want. . .." "I want. ..." The theme, motif, recurring refrain for two weeks up till now, and still it continued. The first two days Santa Claus First Floor had both expected the words and the monotony of the words. By the first week he'd learned that mechanical response, his mind wandering elsewhere, over his
(Continued on Page 11)

# Stay with Santa Claus 

(Continued from Page 2)
many Christmasses till the present. Simple honesty now had compelled him to admit to himself, at least, that his negative reaction to this endless chain of "I wants. . . ." grew from the cumulative impact of them all, rather than from his recognition that each individual's yearnings were voiced from his or her own little world of childhood wonder, perplexity and dependence, need for love-or the lack of love extended.

During those two weeks of incessantly voiced "I wants. . . ." he'd come to ponder more deeply Laurie's charge that he was selfish, utterly selfish himself. As an accountant he was accustomed to working with additions and subtractions and totals. With two weeks to ponder the deeper implications of the ever mounting succession of "I wants. . .." he'd discovered certain patterns, the most obvious being that the older children whom he'd balanced on his tiring knees, the more they had included "I wants... . " for other people, while still including themselves, but sometimes only as afterthoughts.
There was an answer somewhere in the substance of all this, some elusive total that still lay beyond his grasp, remained as intangible yet tempting as compelling as the ancient and beautiful strains of "Silent Night" which filled the now almost deserted department store as the clock's hands registered, finally, 11 o'clock. Time to leave. At last!

As he prepared to stand, he saw the soleum, beautiful face of the only child who remained standing before him, parka hood down now, a tiny, slight Christmas angel before his towering red and white and black immensity.

Again he sat, this time quietly beckoning for her to approach, and when she did he lifted her onto his knee.
"And what are you doing here? What do you want for Christmas?" the rote, gruff sentences slipped out, but with this last child of the season he listened and harrumphed and cleared his throat as her response to this huge stranger was a gently voiced, "Mama told me to stay with Santa Claus." And the child gave him a tentative hug, her tiny hands and arms trying to encompass all of him but only spanning his massive chest. "I want my daddy to come home for Christmas, if you can find him. Mama said he had important things to do. He has been gone a long time now. He's so important to me!"
Santa Claus First Floor lifted her so she stood on his knee. He peered into eyes that were brimful with tears. And his eyes filled, too, until he pushed his spectacles on his forehead and blinked rapidly to clear them.
Her mother was standing below them now. Santa Claus First Floor cleared his throat.
"What do you want for yourself?"
Her "Only my daddy for mama and me" brought that elusive final sum into partial focus, momentarily disjointed, then into clear focus. Babies demand love, children begin to share it, and adults in this weaning process finally provide it in illimitable supply-a near ending circle of growth for each generation.
Santa Claus First Floor gave the child a great hug and began to remove the pillow, pantaloons, boots, belt and cap and, finally, the beard.

[^0] with Santa Claus."


[^0]:    "Your daddy will be home for Christmas, Joanie. Yes, stay

