

# Anta Claus

“I can’t,” Alex called from his third-row desk.

“Yes, you can, Alex,” said the tall teacher. “Just give it a try.” He pointed to the list of rules above the blackboard. “And remember to lower your voice in the classroom.”

“But I can’t even *try* to do this,” said Alex, more loudly.

The teacher turned toward the blackboard. Seeing that the chalk doghouse was smudged, he quickly drew a new one.

“Alex, you can do it. And you can also use a soft voice.”

“No matter what voice I use, I still can’t do this,” Alex muttered to himself.

Winter vacation was a week away. The third-graders were cutting out paper snowflakes to tape on the windows of the classroom at the end of the hall. Outside, real snowflakes had fallen overnight. By morning the snow had turned to gray slush that coated the playground.

“I can’t do this,” Alex repeated as his paper snowflake fell in pieces onto the floor.

The tall teacher walked to Alex’s desk. “Watch, Alex,” he said, holding up a sheet of paper. “You fold the paper like this, this, and this. Now you cut the snowflake along

the folded edges here, here, and here. Then you spread it apart.”

The teacher held up a lacy six-sided snowflake.

“I see that *you* can do it,” Alex said. “But I can’t.”

The tall teacher regarded the scraps on the floor. “Alex, you say ‘I can’t’ whenever you face something new.

Perhaps if you start saying ‘I can,’ you’ll start succeeding at school.”

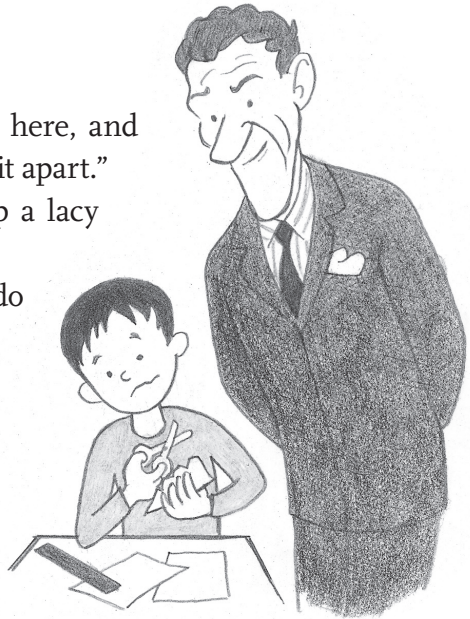
“I can’t,” said Alex.

Meanwhile, the other third-graders busily taped snowflakes to the windows. No two were the same. Some were pointed crosses, some were circles, and some were hexagons cut with extraordinary patterns.

Alex folded his paper just as the teacher had shown him. He cut it exactly as the teacher had. But when he unfolded it, he held a wobbly white blob with a square missing from the middle.

“I can’t do this,” Alex repeated. “I can’t. I can’t.”

With recess time near, the tall teacher told Alex to tape his blob snowflake to the window. He chose a bare spot behind the guinea pig cage. But as he was applying tape to



his flake, something—a dark figure—suddenly appeared on the far side of the glass.

“AAAACK!” Alex screamed.

The figure was a tall, skinny man with a bushy black beard. He wore a fuzzy black suit fringed with white fur, and on his head sat a floppy pointed hat with a white cotton ball attached to its tip. A wide white belt cinched the black suit at the waist. With his red nose pressing against the windowpane, the man scowled at Alex.

“AAAACK!” Alex shouted again.

“Shhh!” went the teacher, writing *Alex* in the doghouse.

“But there’s a strange-looking man out there,” Alex said. “He’s standing at the window!”

The teacher and the other kids peered outside. The only man they saw was Mr. Leeks, who was shoveling slush off the sidewalk.

“Must be your reflection, Alex,” the teacher said.

Alex stared at the black-bearded man, and the man frowned back at Alex.



“But my reflection wouldn’t have a beard!” Alex muttered, rubbing his chin.

When the tall teacher dismissed the class for recess, Alex stepped cautiously onto the slushy playground. Could the man in the black suit still be out there? Alex stood by the climbing structure, scanning the gray asphalt.

Nearby, Hannah was shuffling her boots through the wet snow to make a maze. “Come and help, Alex,” she called out.

“I can’t.”

Paul slid by on an ice patch. “Give it a try, Alex.”

“Can’t,” Alex said.

“Zip up your coat and buckle your boots, Alex,” called the Playground Lady.

“I can’t and I can’t.”

Alex had almost forgotten about the dark figure when a deep voice behind him boomed, “Oh, oh, oh!”

“AAACK!” Alex spun around.

The skinny man stood there. His pointy black hat and his bushy beard flapped in the breeze. Now Alex saw that he also wore shiny white boots and held a canvas sack.



“Oh, oh, oh!” the man repeated. “Oh, oh, oh!”

Alex glanced toward Hannah, Paul, and the Playground Lady.

“No one else on the playground can see or hear me, Alex,” the man explained. “Oh, oh, oh! I’m visible only to boys and girls on my Can’t List.”

“Who are you?” Alex asked.

“I’m Anta Claus of Antarctica. I live in a small, cozy cottage at the cold South Pole.”

Alex made a face. “Anta Claus? Your name is Anta Claus? Could you be related to the other Mr. Claus, the one who lives at the other pole?”

“I believe I am, Alex,” Anta said. “But my jolly fat cousin is on the opposite side of the Claus family tree.”

Alex’s eyes lit up. “So, Anta Claus, do you give things to children too?”

“Oh, oh, oh! Indeed I do,” the skinny man said. “I give boys and girls a hard time. I give them lip and I give them the slip. I give children dirty looks and I give them fits. I give airs and earfuls, and I can give them the boot without giving a hoot. But my specialty is giving this.”

Here the man reached into his canvas bag. He pulled out a white cookie the size of a pizza and decorated with white sprinkles.



“A giant cookie?” said Alex. “Give me a break.”

“This, Alex, is my Up biscuit,” Anta Claus said. “Oh, oh! My two trolls, Tis and Twas, baked it back in my Antarctica workshop. This is what I give to all the boys and girls on my Can’t List. I give Up.”

“So what’s a Can’t List?”

“Well, Alex, each school year I leave the South Pole in my black sleigh and travel around the world to visit the children who say ‘I can’t do this’ or ‘I can’t do that’ too often.”

Alex stared at the huge round biscuit. “But what’s the point of giving Up?” he said. “I can’t eat all that.”

“And I’ll give you credit, Alex,” said Anta. “When it comes to saying *can’t*, you’re at the top of my Can’t List. That’s why I’m spending this entire school day giving Up anytime you need it. Oh, oh, oh! Got to go.”

And with that, the skinny man vanished.

*Treeeep!* The Playground Lady blew her Bad-News Whistle to end recess.

“I can’t believe that guy,” Alex said as he trudged inside. “Anta Claus of Antarctica! He can’t be for real.”

Back in the classroom at the end of the hall, the tall teacher stood at the art table slicing strips of colored paper with a giant paper cutter.

“Now, class, we’re going to make a long paper chain,” he announced. “We’ll drape it around the walls to brighten up our classroom this winter.”

The teacher passed out paper strips to each third-

grader. He showed them how to glue the strips into rings and loop the rings together to form a chain.

“And after you each make a small chain, join it with your neighbor’s chain,” he said. “If we work together, we can break the W. T. Melon paper-chain record, two and a half times around this classroom.”

Alex stared at the stack of paper slips on his desk. That’s when the helpless, hopeless feeling came. That’s when he felt overwhelmed by the size of the project. It was too huge, too complicated. He could never complete a paper chain. He didn’t even know where to start.

“I can’t do this,” he said.

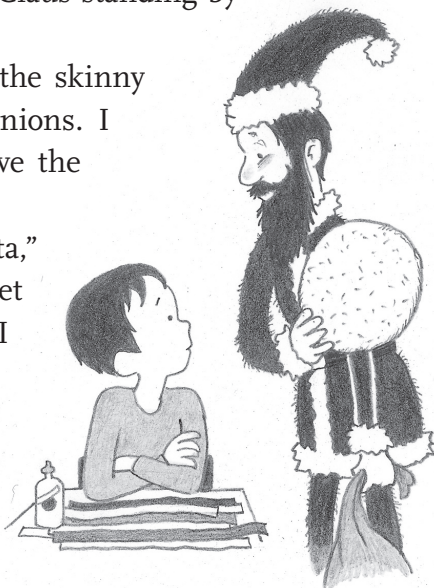
The moment he spoke, he heard a booming “Oh, oh, oh!” beside him.

Alex turned to find Anta Claus standing by his desk.

“I’m here to give, Alex,” the skinny man said. “I give poor opinions. I give out and I give in. I give the go-around and I give pause.”

“Give it to me straight, Anta,” Alex said. “How will I ever get through this art project? I can’t make a paper chain.”

Anta reached into his canvas bag and pulled out his huge Up biscuit. “Oh, oh, oh! So I’ll give Up.”





Alex made a face. “And you say eating Up will help me?” he said. “But I can’t. Look at the size of that thing.”

“Oh, oh, oh! You mustn’t eat the whole Up at once, Alex. Just a bit at a time. Chew it thoroughly, and then see what you *can* do.”

Alex reached out and broke off a small piece of the white biscuit. He placed it in his mouth and chewed. “Yum. Tastes like peppermint.”

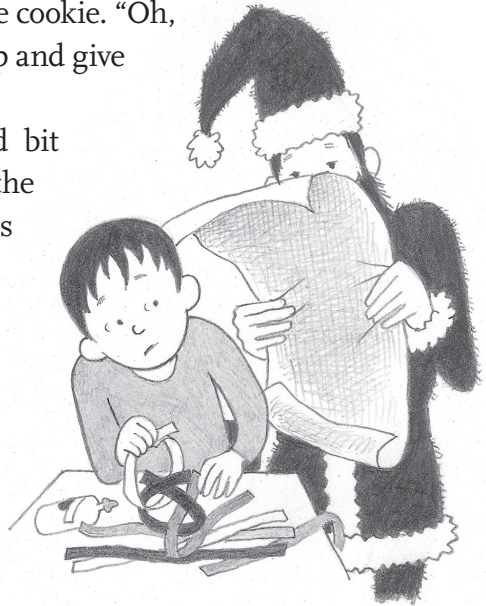
He picked up a strip of red paper. He looped it into a ring and applied glue to each end. When he pinched the ends together, they stayed stuck. But while he was looping a blue strip through the red ring, the whole chain broke apart.

“I can’t do this,” he moaned.

Anta Claus held out the cookie. “Oh, oh, oh! Try some more Up and give it your best shot.”

After eating a second bit of biscuit, Alex remade the red loop. This time he was able to slip the blue strip through it and make that one into a loop too.

When Alex turned toward Anta for more Up, he found him reading a long paper scroll.





“What’s that for?”

“I’m checking my Can’t List,” Anta explained. “A kindergartner in Kansas just said ‘I can’t’ while trying to do Chinese jump rope. A fifth-grader in France said ‘I can’t’ while reciting a poem, and a first-grader in Florida—oh, oh, oh!—said ‘I can’t’ when asked to spell *can’t*. The list is long.”

“Well, I can’t get past the third loop in my paper chain,” said Alex.

Anta held out the Up. “Give it a whirl, bit by bit, one small step at a time,” he said.

Alex ate a third Up piece and finished the third loop. With a fourth bit, he added a fourth loop. Bit by bit, strip by strip, loop by loop, the chain grew. To Alex’s surprise, his chain was soon as long as his arm. He joined it with Tanya’s chain, and together they joined their chain with Louis’s.

“I’m doing it, Anta,” Alex said. “Just by eating Up.”

At that moment the tall teacher dismissed the class for PE. Inside the gym the tumbling mats had been spread out.

“Today we’ll practice somersaults,” announced the PE teacher.

Alex felt crushed. The thought of trying this complicated tumble had his brain rolling with *I can’t I can’t I can’t*.

His turn came. “I can’t do it,” he said aloud.

*Poof!* Anta appeared by his side. Holding out the Up,

Anta said again, “Give it a whirl, bit by bit, one small step at a time.”

Alex ate a bit of the biscuit and stood on the end of the mat. “OK, first I’m supposed to squat and place my hands on the mat,” he said in his head.

This done, he turned for another piece of Up.

“Second step. Lower my head.”

Done, and more Up.

“And now I roll forward.”

Alex’s somersault was awkward; he rolled off the side of the mat, but he made it around.



“Your Up is working,” he told Anta, who was still standing there. “But it’s sure filling.”

When PE was over and the students were back in the classroom, the tall teacher passed out blank world maps. “For social studies today, class, I want you to label and color in the seven continents.”

Alex stared at the empty map. This time, however, he didn’t feel overwhelmed. This time, what he felt was an ache in his stomach from all the Up he had eaten.

Holding his belly, Alex looked around for Anta, but in vain. “I couldn’t eat another crumb of Up anyway,” he groaned. “I think I’m going to throw up Up. Now what can I do?”

He studied the map again. That’s when he recalled

Anta's words. "Why don't I give it a whirl," he said. "I'll take it one continent at a time." And with a gray crayon he started to color in Antarctica.

That afternoon during reading, the tall teacher passed out new books. "Read the first story silently," he announced.

Alex flipped through the thick book. His classmates waited for him to call out *I can't*, but that wasn't what happened. Instead, he turned to the first page and began to read. In fact, Alex didn't say *I can't* again for the rest of the day.

Anta Claus did make another appearance, though. Just before the bell rang, Alex heard, "Oh, oh, oh!" and looked out the window. There, flying above the playground, was a black sleigh drawn by eight shaggy black yaks. Anta Claus sat in back waving. He called out words only Alex could hear.

"Oh, oh, oh! I'm Anta Claus of Antarctica. And I'm ready to give. I give bad advice and I give the once-over. I never give a fair shake or . . ."

Suddenly Anta's sleigh vanished and his voice went silent.

Alex grinned. "I'm off Anta's Can't List!" he said too loudly.

The tall teacher shot Alex a look. "But, Alex," he said, spinning toward the blackboard, "you're back in the doghouse."

