

**OFFICIAL
CORRESPONDENCE
FROM THE
NORTH POLE**





Dear Family,

Before I tell you how they were chosen, I should probably tell you how the whole thing started.


But, alas, I should probably introduce myself, first. My name is Miss Inkwel, and I have been Head Instructor at Elf Academy for longer than I will admit in writing. In all those years, every class I have taught was made up of elves who had grown up knowing exactly what they were. Elf families, elf villages, elf traditions going back generations. My students have always known their destiny long before they knew their multiplication tables.

This year was different.

In late winter, Santa called me into his study. This is not an unusual occurrence — Santa calls me in fairly regularly, usually to discuss curriculum, occasionally to ask where he left his glasses, and once, memorably, to ask whether reindeer could be allergic to tinsel. (They cannot. But it was a reasonable question.) This time, however, he asked me to sit down. And then he said something I had not expected.

"MaryAnn," he said — he is one of the very few people I permit to use my first name — "I want to try something new."

He had been thinking, he said, about the children. Not the elves — the children. The ones who write to him every year from every corner of the world. Children who live very different lives, who celebrate in different ways, who want different things and dream different dreams.



For years, he had been trying to understand all of them. And for years, he had been sending elves to deliver Christmas to a world that was changing faster than any of them could quite keep up with.

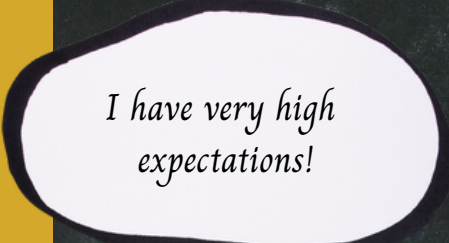
What he needed, he said, was a class of young elves who already understood the world. Not elves who would have to learn it from the outside — elves who came from it.

He told me what he was looking for. Kindness. Curiosity. Creativity. Bravery. A way of looking at the world that he described as "exactly what we need, and I cannot explain it better than that." Then he looked at me over his glasses and said: "You'll know them when you read them."

He left the rest to me.

The invitations went out on a Thursday. They did not travel by post. They appeared — tucked under a pillow, between the pages of a book, sitting on a windowsill between one blink and the next. Each one was written in the recipient's native language, on paper that smelled faintly of peppermint, sealed with red wax and a small gold star.

The applications came back within the week.



I have very high expectations!





I should note that I received considerably more than twenty-one. Most were wonderful. Some were wonderfully unusual. I cannot share names, but I would be remiss not to acknowledge: the applicant who submitted entirely in invisible ink (we eventually found it — mostly), the applicant who listed "professional napper" as their primary elf talent (not technically an elf talent, but something I respect deeply and will not say more about), the applicant whose reindeer ate a portion of the application and who resubmitted twice (still not quite right, but I noted the persistence), and the applicant who applied on behalf of their pet hamster. The hamster's section on "Relevant Experience" was, I will be honest, more compelling than several of the other applications.



I wish we could accommodate each and every single one of the very special, talented elves that applied, but in the end, twenty-one rose to the top, each for very different reasons, but you'll notice, but common thread was their pride in their country and culture, even as they were applying to leave it behind for a period of time. And, that's what I believe will make this historic first ever class, one to remember.

Here is what I remember about each of them.



What I Remember About Each Application

ARMAN — Arman's application arrived in triplicate. The second copy contained corrections to the first. The third was an apology for the corrections, along with a note explaining that upon reflection, the original was correct. I found all three copies equally impressive, and slightly exhausting in the best possible way.

BELLA — Bella's application was the shortest of the twenty-one — five sentences, seven follow-up questions, and a note at the bottom that read: "I assume this will not be a problem." It was not a problem. I answered all seven questions the same afternoon. She replied within the hour. Her reply said: "Good. See you in July." She did not ask if she was welcome. She had already decided she was.

BRICE — Brice listed his greatest achievement as "third fastest skater in my province." I made inquiries. He is first. When I mentioned this later, he said he "didn't want to seem like he was showing off." This is the most Canadian thing I have encountered in twenty-something years of teaching, and I mean that as the highest possible compliment.

CHRISTOPHER — Christopher's application was two pages of jokes, followed by half a page of answers. The half page of answers was genuinely excellent. The jokes were also, I will quietly admit, very funny. He wrote in the Additional Comments section: "Does the Academy have a laugh quota? If so, I would like to apply for a medical exemption. My doctor says I am physically unable to stop." There is no laugh quota. I have not told him this. I am very curious what happens next.

ELARA — Elara's application asked three questions about her potential classmates' wellbeing and only one question about herself. The one question about herself was: "Is it alright if I bring a few animals? They are very well-behaved." I said yes. I should have asked how many. I have since learned that Elara and I define "a few" very differently. The animals are, for the record, extremely well-behaved.

EMILY — Emily's application was the most carefully written of all twenty-one. She crossed out the first three drafts, which she included by accident. I liked the crossed-out versions best. The crossings-out told me considerably more about her than the final copy did. I have kept them.

What I Remember About Each Application (continued)

HOLLY — Holly's application arrived bound, tabbed, color-coded, and with a full table of contents. She is eleven years old. Section four contained a bibliography. One of the sources was herself. She cited it as "H. [surname withheld], personal correspondence, ongoing." I accepted this without comment.

ISHI — Ishi's application arrived on paper she had made herself. I know this because she mentioned it in a small note at the bottom, not as a brag — just as an explanation for why the edges were slightly uneven. She apologized for the edges. I framed it. The frame is on my wall.

JACTAR — Jactar's application arrived neatly folded into a very precise square, which I mention because unfolding it revealed that he had written it, reconsidered it, refolded it, and then sent it anyway. I could see the faint impressions of the earlier draft underneath. It was braver than he knew.

JESSICA — Jessica's application had a small clay bird attached to the upper right corner. No explanation was given, then or since. The bird is on my desk. It appears to be watching me write this letter. I do not mind.

KAI — Kai's application contained a diagram of an original dance he called "The North Pole Shuffle" and a strong suggestion that it become the Academy's official welcome dance. He provided twelve illustrated steps. Step seven was circled twice with the note: "this one is hard but you will get it, I believe in you." I have been practicing step seven. In my office. With the door shut. Step seven remains a challenge.

LEYLA — Leyla's application arrived with a light dusting of glitter on the envelope. I do not know how it got there. There was more glitter inside. The first sentence made me laugh before I had finished reading it. I will not spoil it here. Ask her yourself someday when you know her better.

MATTHEW — Matthew's application was three pages longer than requested and contained two extended tangents, one dramatic detour, and a campfire story that had nothing whatsoever to do with the question asked. I read every word. I would have read three more pages without complaint and he should know that.

What I Remember About Each Application (continued)

MOLLY — Molly asked two questions in her application before submitting it. The first was whether the Academy had an ice rink. The second was whether it had been properly maintained. When I confirmed both, her completed application arrived within the hour. I suspect the application was already written. She was simply waiting on the rink situation before she committed.

PAUL — Paul's application included an unrequested structural diagram of an improvement to the Academy's front gate hinge, which he had apparently researched from a photograph on our website. Our facilities team reviewed it. They are implementing it this spring. Paul does not yet know this. I am looking forward to telling him.

PETE — Pete's application mentioned, by name, four other applicants he had somehow already connected with during the process. I have no idea how he managed this. When I asked him later, he shrugged and said "people are interesting." He is not wrong. He is also, as far as I can tell, the only person in the world who acts on this thought every single time.

SAMO — Samo's application was charming, funny, creative, and unexpectedly moving, sometimes within the same sentence. I finished reading it and had the uncomfortable feeling that I should have written something that good. I have been teaching for a very long time. This was a new experience.

TALIA — Talia's application listed seventeen dance styles she had studied. The eighteenth, she noted, she was "currently working on, but it would be completed well before the start of term." It was. I checked.

TYLER — Tyler listed, under Relevant Experience: eaten a worm (intentionally), jumped off a roof with an umbrella (the umbrella, he noted, "did not fully commit to the plan"), and "survived most things I probably should not have, so far." That last part — so far — is doing a tremendous amount of work in that sentence, and I admire it enormously.

ZAHIR — Zahir's application somehow convinced me that selecting him was entirely my own brilliant idea. I have reread it six times trying to identify exactly how he accomplished this. I still cannot find it. I have decided this is reason enough.

What I Remember About Each Application (continued)

And last, but certainly no least:

ZEKE — Zeke submitted his application as a song. In three-part harmony. He recorded all three parts himself and enclosed the recording. The reindeer barn is apparently adjacent to his family's home, which explains why four reindeer can be heard joining in around the two-minute mark. I played it for Santa. He said: "Well. Obviously." Obviously.



Image: Elf Academy

This month, I am sharing four applications in full — four that capture, in the students' own words, what it felt like to receive that letter and decide to answer it. I chose them because they each said something true. And because I read them in the staff room and my tea went completely cold.

With great warmth and only slightly papercut filled fingers,

Miss A. Inkwell
Head Instructor, Elf Academy



Student Application #1

ELF ACADEMY - AURORA CLASS - Official Application for Enrollment

Applicant Name: *Jactar*

Where are you from? *A small village in India. It takes a day to walk from one end to the other. I have done this many times. I know every stone.*

Why do you wish to attend Elf Academy? *Because the letter came. And because my grandmother said "of course" in the voice she uses for things that have already been decided. And because I have always wanted to see what is past the road I already know, but I did not think I was allowed to want that. The letter made me think perhaps I am.*

Describe a time you showed kindness, creativity or bravery. *I am not sure I have done anything very brave. But I know when someone is sad even when they are pretending not to be. I sit with them. I do not always say anything - sometimes I think the not-saying is the part that helps. I don't know if that counts as any of the three things on your list. I hope it counts as something.*

What do you believe your Elf Talent to be? *I think my elf talent might be knowing which direction someone needs you to stand. Not too close. Not too far. Just - there.*

(Miss Inkwell's note: It counts, Jactar. It counts as all three.)



Student Application #2



ELF ACADEMY - AURORA CLASS - Official Application for Enrollment

Applicant Name: Holly (full name available upon request; it is considerable)

Where are you from? Britain. Specifically, a large house containing one eccentric mother, one father who collects what Mother calls "inexplicable objects" and Father calls "a curated collection of singular significance," approximately four thousand books, and more hair accessories than I will itemize here. I have grown up surrounded by interesting things and have developed strong opinions about all of them.

Why do you wish to attend Elf Academy? I have forty-seven questions about the North Pole that cannot be answered by any reference material currently available to me. I find this unacceptable. I have also been told, on more than one occasion, that I ask questions that make adults need to sit down, and I believe this skill may prove useful in an educational setting.

Describe a time you showed kindness, creativity or bravery. Last spring I reorganized the entire village library while the librarian was on holiday. She had not requested this. She has since described the result as "a lot" and also "genuinely impressive." I consider both accurate.

What do you believe your Elf Talent to be? Finding things out. Also, I am very good at getting adults to explain things they assumed I was too young to understand. They are almost always wrong about that.

(Miss Inkwell's note: The forty-seven questions arrived as Appendix C. They were organized by category. Category six was labeled "Miscellaneous (Urgent)." I have answered thirty-nine of them. Eight require further research. She knows which eight.)



Student Application #3

ELF ACADEMY - AURORA CLASS - Official Application for Enrollment

Applicant Name: Elara

Where are you from? Norway, which is cold, but has very good hot chocolate. I now realize this may have been preparing me for Elf Academy my entire life without anyone telling me. That seems like something someone should have mentioned.

Why do you wish to attend Elf Academy? Because twenty-one elves from twenty-one different places, all in one room. Do you have any idea how many kinds of wonderful that is? I have been trying to count since the letter arrived and I keep losing track because I get too excited and have to start over. I have started over eleven times. I think the answer might be infinite.

Describe a time you showed kindness, creativity or bravery. Every time a new student arrives at my school, I sit with them at lunch on the first day. Not because anyone told me to. Just because first days are hard and nobody should eat alone if they don't have to. I have been doing this since I was six. I am very good at finding things to talk about. Even when the other person doesn't want to talk yet, I can find things. I just talk about the food until they feel comfortable. Food is a very reliable topic.

What do you believe your Elf Talent to be? Making sure nobody feels left out. Also, I make an exceptional hot chocolate, but I think the first one is probably more useful at the North Pole. Although I would be very happy to also make the hot chocolate. I am flexible.

(Miss Inkwell's note: On her third day, she brought hot chocolate to the entire staff room. Unprompted. It was exceptional. The flexibility appears to be entirely genuine. So does the hot chocolate.)



Student Application #4

ELF ACADEMY - AURORA CLASS - Official Application for Enrollment

Applicant Name: Bella

Where are you from? Somewhere very cold in the United States, which I mention only so it is noted that I already know what cold is and will not be making a fuss about it.

Why do you wish to attend Elf Academy? Because I have spent my whole life being told what I probably can't do, and I have spent my whole life doing those things anyway, and I would like a year of doing them somewhere completely new. Also because the letter said "chosen," and I have decided to believe it.

Describe a time you showed kindness, creativity or bravery. I would rather not pick just one. It feels like the wrong question. I try to do all three most days. Some days I manage it. Some days I just manage to get where I'm going, and I have decided that counts too.

What do you believe your Elf Talent to be? Convincing people I can't do something, and then doing it anyway. It is a very specific talent, but I have had a great deal of practice.

Questions for the Academy (please respond at your earliest convenience):

1. Are the main pathways cleared of snow and ice, and if so, how regularly?
2. What are the standard dormitory doorway widths?
3. Is the dining hall on the ground floor?
4. Are there steps at the main entrance, and if so, is there an alternate route that doesn't take significantly longer?
5. What is the floor surface in the main hall?
6. Is there a designated point of contact for accessibility questions during the term?
7. Are the reindeer stables accessible? (Lower priority, but I would still very much like to know.)

(Miss Inkwell's note: I answered all seven questions that same afternoon. Her reply arrived within the hour. It said: "Good. See you in July." There was no question mark. There was no "if that's alright." She had already decided. I found this, and still find it, completely wonderful.)





Kindness Challenge

From Miss Inkwell's Desk - A Note for Families:

Every one of these students received a letter that asked them to do something brave. They each said yes in their own way — some loudly, some quietly, some with forty-seven follow-up questions, and at least one with a diagram.

This Month's Kindness Challenge: *Sit with someone who is eating alone. It doesn't have to be fancy. Elara's method — talking about the food until they feel comfortable — works remarkably well and requires no special equipment.*

Until July, Miss Inkwell

Elfin Adventures - North Pole, 88888

Every month, a new adventure.



JUNE

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30				