

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR . . .

CHRISTMAS?

A SEQUEL

YOU ARE AN INTELLIGENT PERSON. Everyone says so. You know the answers to lots of hard questions. Like what is the currency of Venezuela? Or, how does one calculate the length of the hypotenuse of a right angle triangle? Or, just where is Waldo, anyway?¹ The answers to these questions are contemptibly simple for an intelligent and educated person like you.

But if someone were to ask you a really difficult question; say, where is the busiest post office in the world? Would you know the answer? And if you did not know, could you make an educated guess? Would you guess that it must be in one of the great cities of the world, like New York or London or Tokyo?

Any of those places would be good and clever guesses.

But they would all be wrong.

For the busiest post office in the world is not located in a great or populous city. It is in one the most remote, lonely and cold places on Earth. The busiest post office in the world is at the North Pole.

Millions of letters arrive at the North Pole every day, and nearly a billion pieces of mail arrive in December alone. However, unlike most every

¹ The basic unit of currency of Venezuela is the bolivar, the length of the hypotenuse (the side of a right triangle opposite the right angle) is derived by the application of the *Pythagorean Theorem*, which provides that for any right triangle, the area of the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the areas of the squares of the other two sides and Waldo is that chap in the red and white striped shirt just there behind that pole. But, of course, you already knew all of that, for you are, as it has been mentioned, a most intelligent person.

other post office you might name, such as the main post offices of New York City, London and Tokyo, every piece of mail that arrives at the North Pole Post Office is addressed to one person only: Santa Claus.

So, it was an occasion of some uncommon excitement when a small pink envelope arrived, addressed in a delicate cursive hand, not to Santa Claus, but to Iggy, Yugo and Sam, General Delivery, North Pole.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam were Christmas elves and had been employed for many years in the toymaking division of the Santa Claus group of companies. Iggy was the tall one, though he was only tall in elf terms. By any one else's terms, he was quite short. He had dark black hair, which he could never comb right. He had pointed features: a pointed chin, pointed nose and, of course, pointed ears. He wore shoes with pointed toes, but then all elves did.

Yugo was stocky, with dark eyes and a thick black moustache. He was the clever one, a craftsman among a species of craftsmen. He had invented almost all of the toys, which are the staple of Christmas. He had even invented staples. And staplers. But his greatest creation was a red snowmobile, an amazing vehicle that could travel anywhere and on any surface, even snow.

Sam was shorter and stockier than either Iggy or Yugo. Indeed, he was stockier than both Iggy and Yugo standing side by side. He had curly red hair, bright green eyes and a bad attitude. Sam loved to eat, he loved to sleep and he loved to complain. He was so good at complaining that he even won an award for it once from the Omaha Complainers Club, Local 42. He put it in a thin gold frame and hung it up in his bedroom.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam were certainly an extraordinary trio, but among elves they were nothing that special. There were plenty of tall, clever and grumpy elves who lived at the North Pole. To be sure, Iggy, Yugo and Sam had saved Christmas more than most of the other tall, clever and grumpy elves, but even so, among elves of the North Pole, they were generally regarded as ordinary. Maybe even extremely ordinary.

So, it was most extraordinary indeed that any mail should ever arrive at the North Pole addressed to them. And the arrival of this particular letter on a dark October afternoon was the cause of great consternation in the North Pole Post Office.

The first person to notice this anomalous correspondence was Speedo, an elf in tight fitting shorts who worked in receiving. He passed it along to one of the mail sorters, a male sorter named Expo, who took it directly to his supervisor, a female mail sorter named Bimbo. She handed it to her boss, who gave it to his boss, who studied it carefully before she, in turn, took it to her boss. He immediately sent the letter to the security

department where it was x-rayed, sprayed with germ-killing chemicals and placed under a large heat lamp for several hours, which turned the edges of the envelope brown and curly.

Having passed through security, the now slightly toasted letter was taken to the first executive assistant to the senior vice president of the Post Office, who routed it to the senior executive assistant to the executive vice president, delivery, of the North Pole Post Office.

The executive vice president, delivery, formed a committee of other executive vice presidents, including the executive vice president, postmarks, the executive vice president, stamps and labels, and the executive vice president, Arctic operations, to discuss this most unusual letter and what they should do about it. They met each Thursday afternoon for a month and finally agreed (the executive vice president, stamps and labels, dissenting) to pass the letter on to Dingo, the Postmaster of the North Pole Post Office himself, for further handling.

Dingo took one look at the letter, shook his head and grumbled something to the effect that anything he wanted to get done around there had to be done by himself. He rose from his desk, lifted his blue leather Postmaster's cap with the gold trim from its hook and placed it on his head, then left his office to walk the three blocks south² to Elves Barracks B, where he would deliver the letter personally.

Word quickly spread throughout the North Pole Post Office that the Postmaster himself was going to deliver The Letter. A small group of excited executive vice presidents, security personnel, lower echelon bosses and male and female mail sorters scrambled out of their offices and cubicles to follow him, curious to see this most unusual delivery for themselves.

Dingo pushed open the brass doors of the Letters to Santa Sorting Station™ and led a stream of elves out into the street. They marched past the General Store,™ and turned the corner at the Reindeer Spa.™ A few elves kicking a ball back and forth on the sidewalk took notice of this assembly and ran along after it, shouting and laughing as they went. Outside Santa's Hat Inn,™ they passed a small band of elves playing Christmas carols and they too, joined in the procession. Some other

² A person standing at the North Pole can only travel south. The North Pole Post Office is about three blocks south of the North Pole, so from there you can actually walk in all directions, though, if you walked directly north, after three blocks you'd be walking directly south, even if you walked in a perfectly straight line. Asking for directions at the North Pole is a bit like asking 'how many roads must a man walk down?' There is never a right or a wrong answer.

elves crossed the street to join the parade, banging trashcan lids together and cheering.

From there the road wound downhill, past a frozen waterfall and domes of white snow that glittered green and gold under the Northern Lights. An elf selling hot dogs from a pushcart left his wieners behind to join along. The peppermint candy cobblestones snaked through a forest of twisted fir trees, where three more elves, who were hanging tinsel dropped the sparkling strands in the snow to follow.

The tumultuous gathering grew still larger as it climbed back up a hill and past the Poinsettia Palace™. A wedding party cascaded out of the big sugar cookie doors to join the throng, throwing confetti and flowers along the path. One elf juggled snowballs as he ran beside the group and three others turned cartwheels with synchronized precision. By the time they reached Elves Barracks B, there were nearly five hundred elves merrily skipping along behind Dingo, singing, laughing and jingling all the way.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam were engaged in a furious argument about a reality television program when they were interrupted by the clatter of their mail slot. They turned to see the small, slightly toasted but still pink, envelope slip through their door and flutter gently onto the floor. Iggy walked over and picked it up. He turned the envelope over. One of the burnt corners broke off and drifted slowly to the ground.

“What is it?” asked Yugo.

“It’s a letter,” said Iggy. “It’s for us.”

Yugo blinked. Then he blinked again. And once more. And again. He had never heard of an elf receiving a letter before. Nobody had ever heard of an elf receiving a letter before. He glanced over at the mail slot flapping in the door and wondered vaguely why it was there at all.

Sam pulled the door open to see who had left the letter. He was stunned to see almost five hundred elves crowded in the hall, singing and stomping their feet. At the center of the crowd, Postmaster Dingo stood grinning, his official Postmaster’s cap clutched in his hands.

“You will open the letter now?” asked Dingo eagerly, his head bobbing up and down rapidly. Sam involuntarily nodded along with it. Then he shook his head and glared at the gathered elves. “Don’t any of you have jobs?” he grumbled. The elves in the hallway just stomped their feet a little harder and sang a little louder. One of them blew a few notes on a trombone.

Iggy peeled open the envelope and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. It was written on coloured stationery, which might have once been pink,

but was now badly stained from the various treatments, which had been applied by the postal security division. These treatments made the letter entirely free of any bacterial agents or other pathogens, but rather difficult to read.

The stationary was decorated with discoloured unicorns and butterflies. Iggy recognized it even before he started reading. "It's from Jody!" he shouted.

Yugo grinned, "read it!"

Sam just clamped his hand over his eyes and shook his head. In the hallway, five hundred elves leaned closer to the door, a thousand ears straining to hear what the letter said:

Dear Iggy, Yugo and Sam,

I hope that this letter finds you all well. I can't believe that it has been almost a year since you came to visit us. I think of all three of you often.

Stig and I are planning to cook a special Christmas dinner and, if you are not too busy that day, we would be very pleased if you could join us. It will just be a few friends and some family. Grampa Les will be there and maybe Stig's mother, too.

Your friend,

Jody P. Noles

P.S. Things have been a little strange around here lately. I'm really worried about Stig. I could sure use your help.

~ J

Iggy looked up from the letter and smiled. In the hallway, hundreds of elves cheered, stamped their feet and sang.

“If we are not too busy?” sneered Sam. “Christmas is two days away and we are hopelessly behind schedule. We’ve never been busier. There is no way we can go.”

Iggy turned to Yugo, “what should we bring?” he asked.

Sam’s eyes bulged out and his mouth opened and closed like a hungry guppy.

JODY SAT AT HER KITCHEN TABLE leafing through her copy of *Christmas Dinner For Dummies*. Jody was around thirty with dark auburn hair that tumbled in frothy curls around her shoulders, a crooked smile and sparkly eyes that were sometimes gray and sometimes blue. And even though she was tall and slender and pretty, she always felt that she was a little too plain, a little too short and a little too fat.

She had that bad feeling in her stomach again; the one she always got before something terrible happened. Jody had a sixth sense; when her stomach ached like this, she knew for a certainty that something terrible was going to happen soon. Unfortunately, she lacked the much more important *seventh* sense; the one that would have told her just what the terrible something would be.

She tried to forget the elusive premonition gnawing at her belly and concentrate on her book. Christmas was just two days away and she still did not know what she was going to make for dinner. She wanted to try something new and different, but every recipe in *Christmas Dinner For Dummies* was some variation on the theme of stuffed turkey. She wondered what stuffing birds full of breadcrumbs and vegetables had to do with Christmas. There was baked turkey stuffed with sourdough crumbs, raspberry glazed turkey, stuffed with ham and cheesecake and broiled turkey stuffed with spinach and rhubarb leaves. It all sounded good, but it was not what she really wanted.

Just then, an awful thought crashed into her awareness. Could the terrible something she foresaw have anything to do with her Christmas dinner? After all, Stig’s mother was coming, and things did not always go well when Mrs. Hawkins was around.

Then as suddenly as it came, this dreadful fear washed away from her. Her clairvoyance never warned her what might go wrong, only that something surely would. The fact that she had considered, even for a

moment, that her Christmas dinner might go poorly only meant that it would undoubtedly go well. Still, there was something out there. Something terrible. And Jody had no idea what it was.

“If only Iggy, Yugo and Sam were here,” she thought. “They would know what to do.”

Jody had met Iggy, Yugo and Sam a year earlier when they had arrived in their amazing snowmobile, rescued her from a friendly dragon and saved Christmas. “It’s what we do,” said Iggy afterwards.

She wrote them over two months ago, but she had heard nothing in reply. No letter. No telephone call. No e-mail. Not even a note sent by carrier pigeon. She had no idea that her letter had spent several weeks rebounding throughout various departments of the North Pole Post Office before it was finally delivered, a delivery that was, in fact, happening at the very moment Jody read about a recipe for Christmas Turkey Stuffed with Cauliflower and Orange Peel Ragoût.

She recalled the day she had sent it. Just after Amazing Man arrived. Just after Stig began acting so strangely

JODY WROTE HER LETTER ON A SUNNY Monday in late October. Amazing Man appeared for the first time on the rainy Friday night the previous week.

The first people to meet Amazing Man were Howie and Dirk, a couple of kitchen supply salesmen in town for a convention, who found themselves in the Howling Coyote Bar in the Old Quarter. The Howling Coyote was smaller, darker and dirtier on the inside than it looked from the outside, and from the outside it looked like a small, dark and dirty hovel. But nobody inside noticed the stained concrete floor, the unfinished wood panelling or the missing door to the men’s washroom. It was duelling accordion night and the place was jumping. Two middle aged men stood on the stage, stomping their feet while their instruments wheezed out a squealing version of ‘Hit Me Baby One More Time’. The crowd was pressed up against the stage and somebody threw their underwear up onto it. It was a large pair of men’s boxers, slightly soiled. The accordion players were used to this sort of thing and did not miss a beat.

Howie and Dirk cheered them on enthusiastically. They were both a little drunk and were having the time of their lives.

The Old Quarter is where the tourists go at night. It is a tangled few blocks of restaurants, bars and cheesy, overpriced souvenir shops.

Music blasts out onto the streets from various clubs and the tourists walk slowly up and down the crowded road, sipping drinks from large, overpriced novelty glasses. One night in a hundred, someone falls in love there. One hundred nights in a hundred, almost everyone falls in lust.

In the morning, hundreds of people wake up and immediately fall out of lust. They gather their things quickly and sneak out quietly to the street below, which bears the scars of the night before. The street is a landfill of broken bottles, empty cups and vomit. Seagulls peck at discarded bits of pretzels and rank puddles of stinking slop. A small disaster relief team works its way up the block, hosing down the pavement to make it ready for the next evening, when it all begins again.

Howie and Dirk staggered out of the Howling Coyote and wandered down the narrow road, looking for their next drink. They found it a street side bar that did not seem to have a name. A man with tattoos all over his face passed them each a movie theatre sized cup of beer. Howie and Dirk sloppily toasted each other with their enormous lagers and continued down the road.

Travel guides assure visitors that the Old Quarter is safe, if a little rambunctious, as long as they stick to the Tourist Trail. The Tourist Trail is easy to find, it is marked with a red dotted line painted down the centre of the street. Red signs labelled 'Tourist Trail' are located at fifty-foot intervals. The Tourist Trail is well lit and helpful policemen are always nearby.

However, even a block removed from the Tourist Trail, the streets and the people who walk them are both dark and crooked. That is where Howie and Dirk were walking now. They were neither dark nor crooked, they were just looking for a good party. They were looking in the wrong place.

They passed a man in a dark black coat leaning against the wall. Howie turned to him and said, "Hey buddy, do you know where we can find some girls?"

The man in the dark coat smiled. His teeth were small, sharp and completely yellow. The knife in his hand was large, sharp and completely silver.

Howie and Dirk took a cautious step backwards. "We're not looking for trouble," stammered Dirk. The man in the dark coat sneered. "Ya don't have to be, you've already found it."

Another man in a black sweater stepped out of the shadows. If anything, the knife he held in his hand was even bigger than the one brandished by the man in the dark coat.

“Gimme your money,” said the second man. The first one just smiled his obnoxious yellow grin.

Howie dug into his pocket and pulled out the battered leather wallet he had made in high school. He hated to part with it, but there were other things he hated to part with more, like his blood.

He held out the wallet. The man in the dark coat swept it from his hand and pulled it open, while the other man held them at knife point. “You too,” he growled at Dirk.

Dirk dug his own wallet out of his pocket. The man in the dark coat pulled the wrinkled pictures of his children out of the wallet and threw them on the street. He stuffed the few dollars that were there into his coat pocket.

“Is this all you got?” he demanded.

Dirk nodded. He was terrified. He thought he might wet his pants. Howie already had.

“Worthless tourists,” growled the other man. Howie and Dirk stood like a pair of quivering statues. The man in the dark coat nodded. He threw the empty wallets on the ground and they both turned away and walked back up the street.

The two crooks had traveled about twenty feet, when a pair of red Wellingtons landed heavily in a puddle in front of them. The Wellingtons were filled with a pair of size 14 feet. The man who owned the feet, and the Wellingtons, rose up slowly in front of them. He was wearing orange tights, and a tight orange spandex shirt with a red J on the front, which rode up slightly, exposing his soft pale belly. He also wore what appeared to be a pair of red briefs on top of the leotard. A red fanny pack hung from his hip, and a loop of thin rope hung from his belt. He swept a long red cape behind him with his red gloved hands. His face was concealed by an orange and red bicycle helmet and ski goggles.

“Stop, thieves,” the man called in a tight voice. “Stop in the name of the law!”

The man in the dark coat burst into laughter.

“You gotta be kidding,” said the other man.

Howie and Dirk watched in petrified astonishment as the man in colourful leotards and Wellingtons confronted the muggers. He had leapt down from a fire escape on the side of one of the buildings. He seemed to have twisted his ankle, because he walked with a pronounced limp. “Captain Justice does not kid,” said the man in leotards. His cape

flapped softly in the breeze. It looked like it was made of leather. It must have cost a fortune.

“Captain Justice?” snorted the man in the dark coat. “You look more like Captain Jerk-wad to me.”

The other man chortled and then pulled out his knife. “All right, Captain Jerk-wad,” he said sarcastically. “Gimme your money.”

“Drop your weapons, Captain Justice commands it,” the caped man barked sternly. He raised his red gloved fists.

The man in the dark coat looked at the man in the sweater. They each raised their knives and stepped forward.

“You have been warned!” the caped man shouted. He threw a punch at the man in the dark coat. He ducked under the blow and the caped man stumbled forward clumsily. As he staggered past, the man in the sweater drove his knee into his stomach.

“Ugh,” he grunted. The man in the dark coat pushed him over and he curled onto the ground. The man in the sweater kicked the caped man in the ribs. He gave a pained gasp and rolled over. The two muggers laughed.

Howie looked over at Dirk. “We should do something,” he whispered.

The caped man struggled back to his feet. He let out a soft whimper. “Captain Justice will not yield!” he shouted. Then he spun with surprising speed and threw another punch at the man in the dark coat. This time his fist connected. The man in the dark coat’s head spun to the side. A single pointed yellow tooth flipped out of his mouth. The caped man ducked down while the man in the sweater reached for him, turned and leapt back up. His red Wellington connected hard with the mugger’s groin.

The mugger’s eyes opened wide and he fell to his knees. His knife fell from his hand and clattered on to the pavement. The caped man wheeled around and punched him in the side of the head, knocking the man to the ground.

The man in the rain coat spat out blood and charged at his opponent, swinging his knife viciously in front of him. The caped man stumbled to the side and then brought his elbow down hard on the back of dark coat man’s neck. He stumbled forward and his face slammed into a steel green dumpster. He collapsed into a stack of empty beer cans, which clattered into the alley. The caped man limped up to him and stamped his big red boot on his back.

“Let all who prey on the good citizens of New Bedlam know this,” he pronounced. “Captain Justice will not abide it. Captain Justice will hunt you to whatever dark corners you hide in and bring you out before the light of justice! Captain Justice will never rest until you and your felonious kind have been defeated for good and for all!”

Then he hobbled down the street and disappeared into the shadows.

Howie and Dirk walked carefully up to the two criminals, lying unconscious in the street. Howie reached into the man’s dark coat and retrieved his money. Dirk stood beside him.

“That was amazing,” said Dirk.

“Let’s get out of here,” said Howie, standing back up and shaking his head. He sniffed and made a face. “I think one of these creeps wet his pants.”

JODY HEARD ABOUT AMAZING MAN for the first time at breakfast the next morning. Grampa Les was already into his fourth pancake when she joined him at the table. It had been a year since she had moved in with her sister Rhonda and her family, which was made up of Rhonda, her often drunk and always obnoxious husband, Les, their three boys, Ronnie, Donnie and Little Jack and Grampa Les, Les’ grandfather (or maybe even great grandfather, no one really knew for sure).

She had long since worn out her welcome with Rhonda. She knew she should really find her own place, but she had come to like living there. It was close to work and she could help look after Grampa Les. Even though Grampa Les had recently been somewhat rejuvenated, he was still about a hundred years old (maybe more) and he needed a little, for want of a better word, management.

She also liked living next door to Stig. She had been seeing Stig for almost a year now and had put off finding her own place, in large part, because she kept hoping that Stig would want her to live a little closer than just next door. She scattered hints like wildflower seeds whenever they were together, but so far, none had taken root.

Grampa Les held that morning’s newspaper about four inches from the end of his nose as he pushed a large forkful of syrup soaked pancakes into his mouth. His eyes darted from the newspaper to a small television on the corner of the counter. The volume was set at an uncomfortably loud level, but Grampa Les seemed to have to strain to hear it.

“Jeep jumpin’ stumpin’ apple maker. Git a loader ‘dis cackter,” he cackled, spraying droplets of maple syrup on the tablecloth. “We gots oursells some sorts of a super duper guy.”

Jody smiled and sat down across the table from him. Grampa Les spoke in a dialect of gibberish and curse words, which was almost impossible to understand. A mouthful of pancakes did nothing to improve his clarity of expression. Jody just nodded and tried to avoid looking anywhere near his mouth, and the partially chewed pancakes that were trying to escape it, while he spoke.

“Hee hee hee,” Grampa Les giggled. “Sez right here’bouts ‘dis super duper be givin’ out some ol’ fashion butt cleanin’s to a couple o’ yer thugs what had some o’ that a comin’ to ‘em. Lookee!”

He pressed the newspaper in Jody’s face. It was far too close for her to make anything out except for maple syrup spots. She pushed the paper back until she could read the short account of how a man in tights and a cape had broken up a robbery in the Old Quarter. The article went on to describe the robbers’ injuries (severe), the social dangers posed by vigilantes (plentiful) and concluded with a series of questions (unanswered), such as, who was he? Would he ever be seen again? Was he single? And how does he feel about certain recent celebrity marriages? There was an accompanying ‘artist’s rendering’, which depicted an athletic and heavily muscled man in red and orange tights, his face hidden by a gleaming visored helmet.

Jody set aside the newspaper and Grampa Les shouted, “turn it up! Turn it up!”

The same artist’s rendering of a man in red and orange tights filled the television screen. The graphic faded to a somber looking reporter. Jody reached over and turned the television volume to its highest setting. Her ears burned. Grampa Les leaned back and smiled.

“This is Lou Sprocker, outside the Convention Hall in downtown New Bedlam,” the reporter said in grave tones, “with two gentlemen who claim to have met our city’s newest hero.”

The camera panned to show two very excited kitchen supply salesmen. Howie grabbed the microphone and shouted, making the impossibly loud broadcast even louder.

“It was like nothing you’ve ever seen,” he gushed.

“Not ever,” interjected Dirk.

Howie continued. “This guy, he just came out of nowhere and it was like smash ...”

“ ... and bash,” added Dirk.

“ ... and kapow!”

“ ... and ker-plow!”

“It was amazing, man,” added Howie.

“Totally amazing,” concluded Dirk.

The reporter pulled back his microphone and intoned seriously, “there you have it. Two grateful citizens and one amazing man.” The clip of Howie shouting “it was amazing, man” was repeated as the words ‘Amazing Man’ appeared in bold white letters across the bottom of the screen.

Jody shook her head. As if there were not enough strange happenings in New Bedlam without this. She blotted up some of Grampa Les’ pancake and syrup splashes from the tablecloth. He was still snickering and orange juice spilled out of the corners of his mouth.

“Mazin’ man ther callin’ ‘im,” he said.

“I can see that,” smiled Jody.

“Ther sayin’ what he’s gotcher some o’ dem super powers.”

“I really doubt that,” said Jody. “I’m sure he’s just some nut in a cape.”

“Betcher he ain’t neither. Betcher anythin’ yer like what he can leap yer tall buildin’s and such. Prolly got yer bully proof hide, too. An’ yer strenth o’ ten men. Mebbe even yer x-ray vision.”

Jody shook her head. “I just hope that whoever he is, he doesn’t get himself hurt too badly playing super hero.”

“Donut you be worryin’ yersell ‘bout ‘Mazin’ Man. He won’t git hissell hurt,” said Grampa Les. “Not wit’ yer bully proof hide an’ yer strenth o’ ten men.”

The doorbell rang and Jody rose to answer it, taking a moment to turn down the volume on the television set as she walked past it. Grampa Les frowned.

She opened the door and saw Stig standing on the front step. Stig was tall with short brown hair and dark eyes. He had a round head and a round face, which often showed the beginnings of a beard, but that was just because his facial hair grew so slowly that he only shaved once a week.

“Hey,” said Stig.

“Hey,” said Jody.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing much, how about you?”

“Nothing really.”

“I called you last night, but you weren’t there,” said Jody.

“I was out,” said Stig quickly.

“Oh really? What were you doing?”

Stig shrugged. “Stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?” asked Jody.

“You know,” said Stig. “Just stuff.”

“Oh, that stuff,” replied Jody.

“Yeah, that sort of stuff,” Stig smiled.

Jody realized that this discussion was going nowhere, but Stig’s smile told her that nowhere was exactly where the discussion was going to keep going, no matter how hard she pressed. In fact, pressing would only speed up their arrival at nowhere and then where would they be?

“Nowhere,” muttered Jody.

“What?” asked Stig.

“Oh, nothing,” said Jody, looking back up at him. He was quite a bit taller than she was, with big arms and hands. She liked his big arms and hands.

“Did you want to get together later?” Stig asked.

“Sure,” said Jody.

“Great,” said Stig.

“Sure,” said Jody.

Stig turned and ran down the steps. He paused at the bottom and grabbed his knee for a moment. Then he straightened up and waved at Jody before he jogged stiffly back to his house.

Jody frowned. Stig could be mysterious at times. But why was he limping?

IGGY, YUGO AND SAM, TOGETHER WITH ALL of the other elves, were gathered in main auditorium. Throughout the big room, elves whispered, laughed and coughed. Coughing is something that happens whenever a large group of people, even a large group of elves, assembles together in an auditorium. Whether hearing a formal lecture, watching a touching romantic film or listening to a delicate piano duet, someone in the room will always cough, usually at the most moving moment. Iggy wondered to himself why this was so.³ Since all of the elves had received their annual flu shots the previous week, nobody could possibly be sick and there was no reason for anybody to be coughing. But someone was coughing, nonetheless.

It was warm there, and Sam idly fanned himself with a magazine. Another elf coughed. Finally, Santa Claus strode across the floor to the podium at the center of the stage. The whispers died down completely. Santa Claus set his papers on the podium and began to speak.

Someone coughed. Santa Claus glared in the direction of the anonymous elf in the crowd, then shuffled his papers and began, “Good afternoon. I am pleased that you could all be here. I have some very exciting news to impart to you.”

A murmur filled the room, then quieted down again.

Iggy coughed. He did not know why he coughed then. He did not even know that he needed to cough. It just seemed that, somehow, it was his turn to.

Santa Claus continued, “I am pleased to tell you that there are more good little boys and girls this year than ever before.” He held up a single sheet of paper with a short list of names on it. “This is this year’s ‘Naughty List’. By far the shortest Naughty List we’ve ever had in the entire history of Christmas.”

Two thousand elves gasped. One elf coughed.

Santa Claus beamed from behind the podium. “You can be sure that this List is completely correct. Why, I’ve checked it twice. Ho, ho, ho,” Santa chuckled. “I don’t have to tell you that with such a short Naughty

³ People have actually researched this phenomenon. And it is true, people cough more when they are in large groups. See, for example: Pennebaker, J.W. (1980). Perceptual and Environmental Determinants of Coughing. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 1, 83-91. Dr Pennebaker found, in part, that the larger the group, the more coughs per person. Like we needed someone with a big fat research grant to tell us that.

List this year, that the Nice List is much longer than ever. There are a lot of good little boys and girls out there this Christmas and we are going to have to work extra hard to get ready. This meeting is therefore adjourned. All of you, get back to work!" He chuckled a soft 'ho ho ho' and then stepped off of the stage.

The elves stood up and made their way slowly towards the exit.

"Wow," said Iggy. "I never realised how many good kids there were out there."

"It's really something," added Yugo. "Last year the Naughty List filled three bankers boxes."

"Pffft," pfffted Sam. He pfffted a lot. "The kids aren't getting better. If anything they're getting worse. The old man has gotten soft. It's almost impossible to get on the Naughty List these days."

"What do you mean?" asked Iggy.

"You know what I mean," replied Sam.

"I don't know what you mean," interjected Yugo.

"Me neither, what do you mean?" Iggy repeated.

"Yes, what do you mean?" added Yugo.

"You know," said Sam.

"No, I really don't," said Iggy.

"I don't either," said Yugo. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know what I mean," said Sam, nodding.

"Not really," said Iggy.

"Why don't you just say what you mean?" said Yugo.

"Yes," said Iggy, "then we would both know what you mean."

"You already know what I mean," said Sam.

"Not me," said Iggy.

"Me neither," said Yugo.

"Just what is it that you mean?" asked Iggy.

"Tell us," said Yugo.

Sam paused. "I don't even know what we were talking about anymore," he said.

"The Naughty List," said Iggy.

"The old man getting soft," said Yugo.

“Oh right, that,” said Sam. “You know what I mean.”

“Nope,” said Iggy and Yugo together.

“Fine,” sighed Sam. “I mean that Santa Claus changed the rules. You know, with his “No Child Left Behind” plan. You pretty much have to kill somebody to get on the Naughty List these days, and even then you might not make it.”

“Oh that,” said Iggy.

“I know what you mean,” said Yugo.

Iggy’s mind flashed back to another meeting in another auditorium the previous spring when Santa Claus proudly announced his new “No Child Left Behind” policy. He described it is a ‘guideline for the assessment and evaluation of pre-adult behaviour for the 21st century’.

A small brass band played a jolly march as he unveiled the new policy and its handsome logo, though overall it was a tedious presentation with a lot of pie charts, graphs and coughing throughout the audience. Iggy remembered Santa Claus explaining that the old rules were out of date and that a lot of good little girls and boys were not getting their due because of the ‘too rigid application of an inflexible and archaic standard’. His new policy was going to fix all of that. To Iggy, it sounded like a good thing.

The “No Child Left Behind” policy involved a complete overhaul of the rules that Santa Claus had used to judge the comparative niceness and naughtiness of children for generations. Many outdated acts of naughtiness, like dipping pigtails in inkwells, were removed completely from the guidelines. Most petty vandalism was reclassified as ‘good old fashioned mischief’ and no longer reckoned as ‘naughty’. Telling lies or other deceptions were permitted, so long as they could be categorised as ‘mere fibs’. Backtalk, temper tantrums and rudeness were accepted as the ‘free and vigorous expression of ideas’. Perhaps most significantly, Santa Claus introduced a new approach that placed extra weight on a child’s behaviour during the first three weeks of December – the so called ‘December Amnesty’. The new standard allowed an extraordinary effort at goodness in early December to overcome months of prior naughtiness. In effect, the ‘pre-adults’ affected by the new rules could be quite comprehensively naughty for 11.5 months of the year, yet still work their way off the Naughty List with a display of exceptionally good behavior in the last days before Christmas.

Critics of the policy, among them Sam, argued that the ‘No Child Left Behind’ policy was too lax and that many of the kids who were no longer left behind, should have been. All that the policy accomplished was to make it a lot easier for some otherwise thoroughly rotten kids to get their

names on the Nice List. These children were no nicer than they had ever been and, in Sam's mind, the Naughty List was the right place for them.

Iggy disagreed. His natural optimism saw the good in everything, and everyone. "There are no bad kids, only bad rules," he said, singing the jingle, which Santa used to promote his new policy. And anyway, more good kids meant more toys and more Christmas fun for everyone.

Yugo was happy with the new policy, too. He was tasked with designing a more efficient assembly line, and received a large endowment to research and develop a crew of robot toymakers.⁴

That was six months ago. Now, with less than three months left before Christmas, Yugo's next line of robots were still not ready and the elves were working harder than ever to fill toy orders for thousands of children who had never made it onto Santa's Nice List before. They were pulling a lot of overtime and the toy plants were working far in excess of their rated capacity.

"What I mean," said Sam, "is that we are going to be killing ourselves this winter making toys for a bunch of brats." His face lit up with enthusiasm as he spoke. "We should call the rules No Brats Left Behind."

Iggy and Yugo nodded thoughtfully.


"No Brats Left Behind," Sam repeated. "Most of the kids we are making toys for today are rude, ill-mannered slobs. And we are going to be killing ourselves for the next two months making toys for them."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," said Iggy.

"Me neither," said Yugo.

Sam just growled and muttered to himself as they made their way back to the workshop for their first overtime shift of the day.

⁴ The first generation of robot toymakers, the RT-1's, were very skilled craftsmen (or, more correctly, craftsthings). However, an error in their programming led them to form a robot army, which imprisoned the elves and attempted to take over the North Pole. It was only through the heroic efforts of Iggy, Yugo and Sam, that the crisis was averted. It really was an amazing story. It certainly had far more 'citement and 'ventures than the one you are reading.

 ANOTHER SATURDAY NIGHT WITH STIG, thought Jody. Another Saturday night at the *Laughing Ninja Comic Book Shoppe*. Jody would love to go to the Old Quarter, have a meal, maybe go dancing. And they might later. But the first stop on any Saturday night with Stig, was the *Laughing Ninja*.

Stig stood in front of the store window, transfixed. His face was pressed so close to the glass that it was starting to cloud over from his breath.

“I don’t believe it,” said Stig.

“Neither do I,” Jody sighed.

“The new Planet Masters is out,” whispered Stig. “Come on, let’s go inside.”

He grabbed Jody by the elbow and pulled her into the shoppe. As they stepped on the mat inside the door, it emitted a sound like ray guns made in movies.

They walked past a life size card board image of Mr. Spock and down the narrow shelves that led to the back of the little store. Every shelf and countertop was crowded with old comics, movie posters and small plastic statues of superheroes.

Jody wondered whether she was the only woman who ever set foot in the *Laughing Ninja*. She would not have offered long odds against the possibility.

The usual Saturday night group was there; Alert, Herschel, Lance and Rudy. They were huddled around an ancient card table, which was covered with dog-eared spreadsheets, reference books, little metal figurines and multi-sided dice. A winding map drawn on a curled sheet of graph paper was spread out in the middle of the table, beside a large bowl of ripple chips. Two litre bottles of coloured soda stood on each corner. They were engaged in a complex game that had carried on for years every Saturday night in which each assumed the identity of a medieval character and set upon all manner of noble quests, guided by their game master, Rudy, and the turn of a number of multi-sided dice.

Alert Darr sat on the side of the table closest to the door. Alert was the owner of the *Laughing Ninja*. He was about 40 years old, a little bit bald, a little bit chubby and a whole lot friendly and outgoing. He was called ‘Alert’ because a typographical error on his birth certificate had rendered him one misplaced ‘B’ short of being Albert. His mother, always a nervous woman, perpetuated the error because she felt that to call him ‘Albert’ might compromise the official record. This was a closer brush with the law, and perhaps the child welfare authorities, than she was



prepared to take. So, Alert he was and, forty years later, Alert he remained. In the game, he was a knight named 'Albert'. Really, it was all he had ever wanted to be.

Herschel sat next to him, dressed in a brown hooded robe. He was also wearing large rubber pointed ears. He claimed this costume helped him to 'get into character,' which in this case was a dwarfish druid from the high plains of Yaähr named Anthraxx. He also spoke in a guttural language, Spyýcrōjzz, which he had invented himself. He cast his die on the table and shouted "eprantlēer begwongg isk dûra-ash!" The others nodded thoughtfully and Herschel wrote some figures down on the notepad in front of him.

"The banshee suffers forty hit points damage," said Rudy, who was positioned behind an array of folded cardboard screens. As the game master, Rudy did not get to play a character himself, he merely guided the others on their adventure. Still, he looked rather like the type of small furry imp the players might encounter in the world of their game. He had hair growing everywhere, his face, his arms, his neck and Jody dared not think about where else. The only place where there was no black hair growing in abundance was on the back of his head, where a circle of pink shiny skin grew progressively larger each time Jody saw him.

Lance shook his dice next. He was a little heavy, a little pale and had a patchy rust coloured beard that was the source of great pride to him. Lance Boyle was an intellectual property lawyer with the prestigious law firm of Padd and Gowdge, LLP.⁵ He passed his days registering trademarks and patents and carefully recording each moment he spent doing it. On Saturday nights, he was an Amazon warrior named Jenette.

"I'm using my breath weapon," said Lance/Jenette. He threw the dice on the table, scattering a number of little painted metal figures.

Rudy rolled some dice of his own. "The banshee makes its saving throw. Your breath weapon is ineffective."

⁵ This is not to say that Lance Boyle was an intellectual who practised property law. Lance Boyle was many things; distracted husband, inept father and gentleman nerd; but intellectual he was not. An intellectual property lawyer is a lawyer who practises in the field of intellectual property law, which concerns the legal rights to intangible forms of property like trademarks, patents and, most particularly, copyright.

Lance Boyle has a standing retainer from the author of this story to sue anyone who infringes his copyright back to the dark ages. Kindly govern yourself accordingly.

Jody snorted. If only it were that easy, she thought. Not even extra strength Listerine would render Lance's breath weapon ineffective.

Stig gently shoved her in the side with his elbow, and Jody kept her thought to herself. After all, these were Stig's friends and she was a guest in their ... dungeon.

"Time for the big guns," said Alert. He reached into a velvet bag at the side of his chair and withdrew a small gold twenty-sided die. He flipped it on to the table as he announced, "I strike the banshee with Exhedron." Exhedron was the name of Alert's sword, or, more correctly, Sir Albert's sword. It was a blade forged from the iron of meteorites by the master smith, Armoured Hal for the King of Gilead. The King had bestowed it on Sir Albert for slaying a red dragon in the ruins of Mistmark. Exhedron had magical properties, which added extra points to Alert's roll of the dice.

The four gamers leaned over the golden polyhedron as it rolled crookedly across the table. It stopped and Herschel shouted "Ixtløpaal!"

"Twenty!" said Alert, smiling.

Rudy looked down at his notes. He raised his eyes over his cardboard screen and nodded. "The banshee is destroyed," he announced.

The others cheered and exchanged high fives. Lance took a deep drink of orange soda from his big plastic bottle, then burped wetly.

Alert waved at Stig and Jody. "Hey Jody," he said. "Want to roll up a character and join us?"

"Yeah, come on Jody, join the dork side," said Rudy.

"Not tonight, guys," she said kindly.

The disappointment of the four men at the table was so large and so real, it could have pulled up a chair, called itself Disappointment the Huge, and battled banshees alongside them for the rest of the night.

"Hey Al," said Stig, reaching over and shaking Alert's hand. "I see you've got the new Planet Masters book."

"Sure do," said Alert. He stood up and walked over to one of the shelves. Stig and Jody followed him. "And there's another book here that I want you to see." He pulled a colourful comic off of the top shelf and held it out for Stig.

"No way!" said Stig excitedly. "Truman is drawing Wrektam again?"

"Yup, with Pettinger inks."

Stig and Alert might as well have been speaking Spyýcrøjzz for all that Jody could understand. It had taken her a long time to realize that



'books' were actually comics, and that bigger comics were 'graphic novels'. She had no idea what words they might use to describe actual 'books' or 'novels': the kind that did not have pictures in them.

She cast her eyes along the shelf at all of the covers, with their images of impossibly muscled men and implausibly endowed women, each dressed in the most impractical form fitting and form revealing garments. Each cover promised action, thrills and soul searing surprises.

Her eyes stopped briefly on one cover, which featured a hero dressed in red and orange, under a stylized logo that read: 'Captain Justice.' She picked up the 'book' and flipped through it. Captain Justice was the kind of big-jawed superhero who talked a lot about truth and righteousness while he beat up on the bad guys.

Stig looked over at her. "What have you got?" he asked excitedly. He'd never seen her look at a book before.

Jody showed him the cover. The three gamers sitting at the table all started making gagging noises.

Stig looked surprised. "You can't be serious," he said. "Not Captain Justice. I didn't even know those were still in print. That guy is the worst." He took the book from her and placed it gently back on the shelf.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Jody.

"Only everything," said Stig. "He isn't even super, really. Just a big guy with muscles. His only power is the 'Power of Truth,' which was given to him by the 'Hand of Justice.' It's pretty cheesy."

"It's hardly a super power at all," added Herschel.

"More of a *convenience* than a super power, really," said Lance.

"And not much of a convenience at that," said Rudy. "It's as worthless as a bolivar."⁶ They all laughed.

"Forget Captain Justice," said Stig. "It's kid stuff. Baby stuff even. You don't want to bother with him. Try this instead." He handed her a copy

⁶ Intelligent person that you are, you will know that the Venezuelan bolivar currently trades at 1 bolivar for every 0.000523514 Canadian dollars. This makes it one of the most useless currencies in the world. It costs over 19 bolivars to buy a single Canadian penny. You cannot even buy penny candy with a bolivar. You could buy bolivar candy with one, perhaps, but a bolivar candy is such an insignificant and trivial bit of candy that no one would bother.

The upside? With only \$523.59 (Canadian) to your name, you can be a millionaire in Venezuela.

of Mutant League No. 137. The cover featured three buxom heroines shooting yellow beams at each other from their hands. They were clad in costumes that were more like cleverly arranged straps than actual clothing. It promised 'non-stop action' and a 'senses shattering' climax.

Jody pouted.

Alert reached over, took the book and placed it back on the rack. He retrieved the Captain Justice book and gave it to her. "Don't listen to them, Jody. I know he's a little old fashioned, but I've always been rather fond of the Captain."

Stig sniffed. "Does anyone even buy that stuff anymore, Al?"

"Well, he's no Planet Master," said Alert. "But he still has his fans. I have one customer who comes in every month to get the latest issue. He's got every book going back to the '50's."

"What a waste of money," said Stig. He set the stack of thirteen books he had accumulated on the counter and asked Alert, "how much?"

STIG AND JODY STAYED OUT LATE. They had dinner at the House of Lard (Stig picked it). Then, they went to the movies where they saw a show about love found, then lost and later found again (Jody picked it). After the show, they spent a little time together. It was private time and it would be an intrusion of uncommon rudeness to dwell on it here. Suffice it to say, they were both occupied for a considerable while.

There was no news about Amazing Man in the next morning's papers. But that night, he was the lead story on every newscast. Amazing Man had struck again.

This time the trouble started at Basil's Chateau. Basil's was an old beat up hotel on the edge of downtown. Basil thought the name 'Chateau' lent a certain elegance to the place that a more accurate and truthful name like, 'Basil's Hovel', 'Basil's Dive' or 'Basil's Seedy Rat Infested Urine Soaked Dump' did not. The tavern in the lobby of the Chateau offered a popular lunchtime special, popular because patrons were treated to a cheap steak sandwich and a different young lady on the main stage every 15 minutes between noon and two. The tavern was usually packed during the lunch hour, even on Sundays, and this Sunday was no exception.

Among the many satisfied customers that afternoon, were two kitchen supply salesman, enjoying the last day of their vacation. Howie and Dirk

were seating in the front row, enjoying their discount steaks and happily giving it up for Candi.

Candi was happily giving it up herself, when two large men wearing stockings over their heads burst into the room, shot a couple of rounds from their very large shotguns into the ceiling and demanded that everyone present hand over their valuables.⁷ Howie and Dirk joined the unhappy queue of customers dropping their wallets, watches and gold chains into a bag held out by one of the bandits.

“This town sucks,” said Howie, as he dropped his wallet into the sack.

“I’ll say,” replied Dirk. “This has to be the worst vacation ever.”

The two bandits gathered up their booty and ran for the exit. An old Dodge was running outside with another balaclava clad hoodlum behind the wheel. The two bandits scrambled into the back seat and the Dodge lurched ahead.

And then stopped. Standing right in front of it was a man in very tight orange leotards, a red cape and large red Wellingtons. His arm was stretched out in front of him with his palm raised like a Supreme.

“Halt blackguards,” he commanded, in a less than commanding voice. “Halt and face justice!”

The getaway driver poked his head out of the Dodge’s window and shouted “get out of the way or I’m gonna run you down.” He gunned the engine for extra effect.

Amazing Man stood his ground, his arm still stretched out in front of him. His other arm reached slowly behind his back and rooted through the fanny pack strapped around his waist. “The law will not yield this day, nor will Captain Justice!” he shouted.

“Idiot,” grunted the driver and jammed the Dodge into gear. Black smoke rose from the squealing tires as the Dodge shot forward.

Amazing Man jumped into the air just as the Dodge reached him and landed heavily on the hood. The Dodge accelerated and he rolled up the windshield, grabbing at the wiper blades as he passed. One of them broke off in his hand and he tumbled up onto the roof.

“Ugh” ughed Amazing Man as he scrambled with his right hand to get a grip on the window trim. His other hand was still struggling in his fanny pack. He slid down the back windshield on his stomach, his tight orange shirt rolling up to reveal his belly button to the rear passengers.

⁷ They made an exception for Candi, who at that point in her act quite obviously had nothing of any value left on her.

He pulled his hand free from his fanny pack. He held up a large black suction cup with a rubber handgrip. He slammed the suction cup down hard onto the back trunk and then grabbed it with both hands. His feet were dragging on the asphalt, leaving curled ribbons of red rubber behind.

The Dodge weaved from side to side trying to shake him lose, but Amazing Man held on. He worked one hand free as the car accelerated and reached down to his waist. He unclipped a small wooden club from his belt -- it was actually a Little Stubby Fish Wacker™, the sort of thing fisherman use to send freshly caught trout to a better place, but this one was painted red and orange.

He struck the back window of the car, but the club glanced harmlessly off the glass. He tightened his grip on his handhold and pulled himself up the trunk, closer to the window. The three goons inside shouted at each other. He swung the club again and this time the rear windshield exploded in a shower of tiny glass fragments.

The thugs in the back seat leaned forward to protect themselves from flying glass and the wildly swinging fish whacker. The driver turned around frantically, swearing and imploring Amazing Man to perform a number of anatomically impossible tasks.

Rather than heed these suggestions, Amazing Man threw the fish whacker at the driver. It bounced off his headrest and back out the shattered rear window. Amazing Man ducked and the fish whacker skittered along the trunk and then bounced onto the road. Amazing Man reached back down to his belt. "Stop ... in the name ... of ... justice," he grunted. The driver just laughed and sped up. Amazing Man pulled a coil of metal wire with a hook on the end from his belt and cast it clumsily at the driver.

"Missed me, loser!" the driver shouted.

But Amazing Man had not missed at all. The hook was looped around the steering wheel. Amazing Man pulled on the cable and the Dodge swerved hard to the right. The driver's head slammed against his window. The car spun around in big looping circles down the middle of the street, then it bounced up over the sidewalk, and slammed sideways into a big tree.

Amazing Man finally lost his grip and flew off the trunk. He tumbled three or four times on the adjoining lawn before he landed in a small flower garden. He got up unsteadily, brushing lumps of dirt off of his costume. Pulling his spandex shirt down over his belly, he limped off into an alley just as two police cars sped past Basil's Chateau and pulled

up alongside the wrecked Dodge. The three thugs emerged slowly, their hands raised.

The crowd outside the Chateau cheered wildly. "I love this town!" shouted Howie, and clapped Dirk on the back.

"You said it," Dirk agreed. "This is the best vacation ever!"

JODY WATCHED HOWIE AND DIRK CHEERING on the evening news program while she was making dinner. She was making spaghetti and tofuballs for Stig, but he was late. She scooped the last of the spiced tofu from her metal bowl and rolled it into a ball. She set it on the counter with the others and then brushed her dark hair out of her eyes. This was a completely ineffective effort, because her hair fell right back into her face, only now it had lumps of tofu in it.

She scrutinized her handiwork. Two dozen little tofuballs arranged in a row like shiny ping pong balls.

"Stig is going to love this," she grinned.

She sautéed the tofuballs in a wine sauce, glancing over at the television from time to time. She added tomato sauce to the mix, let it simmer and put a big pot of spaghetti noodles on to boil. She sat back in her chair as a concerned looking television reporter interviewed a police officer. In the background, a smoking Dodge lay curled around a big tree.

The reporter nodded seriously as the policeman spoke. "No, we still don't know who this Amazing Man fellow is, but we would very much like to speak with him. Riding around on the top of moving vehicles is very dangerous. It is also a very serious crime."

"Any leads, officer?" the reporter asked, straining to make his expression as serious and concerned as an expression could hope to be.

"Just this." The policeman held up a small battered wooden club, painted red and orange.

"And what is that?" the reporter asked, in a grim, grave voice.

The policeman looked at the reporter for a moment. But the reporter just nodded, so the policeman said, "well, it seems to be some sort of painted wooden club."

There was an uncomfortable pause before the reporter said, in a voice which was somehow even grimmer and graver yet, "yes, I see. And ... ?" he nodded again.

The policeman swung the club gently. "It's you know, a little wooden club. The sort of thing you might whack a fish with."

"I see," said the reporter, and then turned to the camera and said, in his grimmest and gravest voice yet, "There you have it. The sort of thing you might whack a fish with." Then another lengthy pause before he concluded, "from the front lawn of Basil's Chateau, Lou Sprocker, Channel 7 News."

Jody was transfixed. She knew she had seen that little wooden club, or one very much like it, somewhere before. Perhaps in the summer, she thought. Yes, she was sure of it now, a sunny day, she could almost see it now, she had it, it was in her grasp

But it slipped away from her when the chime of the doorbell interrupted her musings.

"It will come to me," she thought and she walked to the door. She opened it and Stig was standing there, with three flowers in his hand (which looked like they had been picked from the front garden) and a black eye.

"Here," said Stig, offering her the flowers. "Sorry I'm late. What's for dinner?"

Jody had fully intended to give Stig an earful and then some for (a) being late and (b) not calling about (a). However, she now found herself face to face with (c), a swollen purple shiner. This left her with the difficult choice between (d), which was that (c) cancelled out (a) and (b) or (e), where (c) only made (a) and (b) that much worse. She leaned briefly toward (e), but decided to go with (d), while remaining ready to return to (e) at any time.

"What happened to you?" Jody asked, a little more loudly than she meant to.

"What?" Stig asked.

"Your eye? What happened to your eye?"

"What about my eye?"

"It's all black and puffy," said Jody.

"No it's not," said Stig.

"Yes it is," said Jody, tempted to move straight to (e) again. "Did you get into a fight?"



“Me? A fight?” Stig looked shocked at the suggestion. “What ever made you think that?”

“Because you have a black eye.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do. It’s right there.” Jody poked Stig’s eye with her spaghetti spoon.

“Ow!” said Stig. “What did you do that for?”

Jody had now left (d) completely behind and was totally onside with (e). “What’s going on, Stig?”

Stig shifted his eyes away from her. “What do you mean? Nothing’s going on.”

“Then why are you so late? Why didn’t you call? And how did you hurt your eye?” Jody had passed (e) and was on to (f), all of the above.

Stig looked like a rabbit about to be run over by a fuel truck. “I don’t know,” said Stig, “I’m just clumsy I guess. And I’m sorry I’m late. The day just kind of got away from me. You know how I can be.”

Then Stig smiled his sideways smile. The one that made his dimples show. Stig was working the dimples pretty hard, and they were having an effect. “But I’m here now,” he said. “And I did bring flowers.” Jody smiled herself, and pulled back a little bit towards (d).

“Fine,” she said, even though it was not. Not really. “Come on in then. I’ve made you a real treat, spaghetti and tofu.”

Stig winced slightly, but he kept smiling. Having made it most of the way back to (d), he was not going to let go of the dimples. Not even for a second.

He was still smiling when Jody put her flowers in a bottle in the middle of the table, when he sat down and when Jody spooned out a steaming mound of spaghetti and tofuballs. He stabbed one of the gleaming white tofuballs with his fork. He carefully carved off the thinnest slice he could and raised it slowly to his lips. He closed his eyes, popped it in his mouth and swallowed quickly.

It was nowhere near as bad as he was expecting.

They sat for a while, swirling noodles and sipping wine. Then Jody said, “have you thought about Christmas?”

Stig coughed up a tofuball. “Christmas? We haven’t even had Hallowe’en yet!”

“I know, but it’s never too early to think about these things.”

Stig looked a little pale. “What things?”

“Everything. Christmas will be here before you know it. There’s presents to buy, things to bake. I was thinking we should have dinner.”

“Of course we’ll have dinner. We have dinner every day.”

“I mean that you and I should have dinner. Christmas dinner. We could invite your mom.”

“Christmas dinner? With my mother?” Stig was turning pale. Even his black eye faded to an unhealthy shade of grellow. “Are you crazy?”

“I think it will be fun,” said Jody. “We could make it really special. Have a few friends over. I bet Al and Rudy don’t have Christmas dinner plans. And Grampa Les would love it.”

Stig looked like he was about to have a seizure. “Grampa Les? Have you ever seen him eat?”

Jody laughed. “Only every morning. Come on Stig.” Now Jody was working her dimples. She also threw in some work with her eyelids that made Stig pretty much helpless.

“Ok,” he sighed. “If you really want to.”

Jody clapped her hands. Stig smiled weakly, and choked down his last tofuball.

“This is going to be great,” she said. “We’ll make a big turkey. Or maybe a goose. And we’ll have Christmas pudding. And cranberry sauce. And we’ll roast some chestnuts.”

Jody stopped. As soon as she said the word ‘chestnuts,’ she remembered where she had seen the little wooden club before. The sort of thing someone might use to whack a fish. It was also the sort of thing someone she knew might use to crack nuts. Just like the one Stig kept in his kitchen drawer as an improvised nutcracker.

Jody sat down the next morning to write a letter. There was something going on with Stig and she did not like it. She decided to extend her dinner invitation to three extra friends, who might be able to help her.

W

HILE JODY WAS WRITING HER LETTER, a tall man stood in a basement room, reading the morning newspaper. The front page was filled with stories about how Amazing Man had broken up the robbery at Basil's Chateau.

"Amazing Man," snorted the tall man and he slammed the newspaper onto his desk. "It's supposed to be Captain Justice. It can't be Amazing Man. It just can't be."

On the desk beside the newspaper was a red bicycle helmet and a pair of ski goggles. A red and orange spandex suit, smudged with dirt, hung neatly on a hanger along the wall beside a red pleather cape, which must have cost a fortune. Beside that was a small bookcase with a large fanny pack stretched out on top of it. The shelf was arrayed with a number of unusual tools and gadgets: a black suction cup with a handgrip, a length of thin metal cable with a hook on the end, a flashlight, flares, bandages and half a dozen little wooden clubs, each painted orange and red.

Along the opposite wall was a narrow table. On the table, neatly arranged in chronological order and sealed in mylar bags, were stacks of Captain Justice books. In fact, the table held all of the Captain Justice books; including an extremely rare copy of Captain Justice No. 1, issued in 1952, in which the Captain battled the Spider-Dwarves, Mistress Halo and the Doom Triplets for the first time. There was a mint copy of Captain Justice No. 27 (1956) which introduced the Captain's trusty sidekick, Justice Lad; the first appearances of Justice Girl (issue No. 67, 1959), of Justice Beagle and the Canine Crew (issue No. 81, 1961) and, of course, the Justicemobile (issue No. 121, 1965). Obviously, the collection contained some sadder moments in the saga, including the most tragic issue of all, Captain Justice No. 334 (1980), in which Justice Lad was murdered by a villain in a black and navy blue costume. A villain who called himself 'Amazing Man'.

The man walked over to the table, pulled the copy of Captain Justice No. 334 from the stack and threw it across the room. It slid underneath a desk that had a police scanner and a computer on top of it. The computer was hacked into the notorious NBCCVS, the New Bedlam Closed Circuit Video System. Images from security cameras located throughout the city scrolled across the screen. The scanner squawked a bulletin about an 11-98. The man walked over to the computer and clicked the mouse a few times. A speeding police car raced across the screen.

The man pulled the coloured suit from the hanger and quickly slipped into it. He pulled the belt from the book case, clipped it around his waist

and reached for the red helmet and ski goggles. He pulled the cape from its hook and fastened it around his neck with a theatrical swirl, then turned and jogged up the stairs.

THE DAY THAT JODY WROTE HER LETTER was a typical October day at the North Pole. Which means that it was cold and it was dark. Days at the North Pole are six months long and the nights are the same. But, when the sun sets at the North Pole for it's long winter's night, the little city starts to come to life. Dusk at the North Pole means Christmas is just a few weeks away and there is still much work to be done. There will be plenty of time for rest, when the spring sun brings a new dawn.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam spent most of that morning⁸ on the Railroad Line. This is not nearly as dangerous as it sounds. The elves were not sitting on actual train tracks or anything like it; they were working on the assembly line where little toy trains are made. Even though trains are the most backward and outmoded form of mass transportation on Earth, and there are hardly any children who have even been on a real train, toy trains remain inexplicably popular at Christmastime. To children, trains are as exotic as spaceships.

They passed the afternoon in the branch office, fashioning the miniature trees and bushes that line toy train tracks. They also dropped in at the lawn division, where artificial grass is made for model railroads; the steam room, where they attended a course on the physics of steam locomotion and finished the day at the tie rack, stacking little wooden ties on shelves.

Every day is a long day, when they last for six months. Even so, some seem longer than others. This winter, with Santa Claus determined to leave no one behind, there were a lot of those days. That evening, Iggy made popcorn and three exhausted elves settled in to watch a new television program together. It was also the night of The Bet.

The program was 'The Audacious Odyssey', a televised competition in which 10 teams of three people each had to make their way around the world by any means possible, including such unfashionable conveyances as trains and blimps.

⁸ Strictly speaking, it was not morning at all. Morning at the North Pole is that period between about the middle of March and the middle of June. The middle of October is actually the early evening, just past twilight.

“Great,” said Sam. “If this show is a hit, we’ll be building toy blimps next.”

The show aired every night from Monday to Friday. On Monday, the teams were given a destination which they had to reach by the following Friday. The last team to arrive on Friday night was out of the competition. Along the way they were also required to perform a series of pointless and often dangerous tasks.

The teams were comprised of the usual groups of people who participate on these sorts of programs; there was a team of three beauty pageant winners, two teams of three waiters/bartenders, an old team, three brothers, three sisters, a set of triplets, a team of three old friends of indeterminate gender, three swimsuit models and one team made up of a very tired looking man competing with two of his ex-wives.

“We should get on this program,” said Iggy.

“I’ll say,” said Yugo. “With the snowmobile, we’d be a cinch to win.”

“They never put elves on shows like this,” said Sam. “The producers are all way too speciesist⁹ for that.”

They watched for a while. The ten teams were running through a busy city street carrying heavy backpacks and looking for a man in a bowler hat and moustache who was to provide them with directions to their next stop.

“It’s really not that difficult, if you ask me,” said Yugo.

“Looks pretty hard to me,” said Sam. “There’s an awful lot of running.” He patted his prodigious belly. “I’m really not that fond of running, myself.”

“They are going around the world the easy way, from side to side,” explained Yugo. “If they wanted to make it really interesting, they’d travel from top to bottom.”

“Through both poles?” asked Iggy.

⁹ This is actually a real word. The New Webster’s Dictionary defines ‘speciesism’ as follows:

spe·cies·ism (spē'-shē-zīz'əm, -sē-) *n.* Human intolerance or discrimination on the basis of species, especially as manifested by cruelty to or exploitation of animals.

A person who discriminates on the basis of species is a speciesist. Thankfully, most good restaurants practice speciesism, or one could find oneself seated next to a table of rats or monkeys. Not all discrimination is a bad thing.

“Exactly,” said Yugo. “Now that would be an Audacious Odyssey.”

“It would certainly be interesting to see a blimp flying through town,” said Iggy.

“You know what would make this interesting?” said Sam.

“What’s that?” asked Iggy.

“If we had a little action on it.”

“Action?” asked Yugo.

“You know, if we put some money on the winners. Some sort of a bet,” said Sam.

“What kind of a bet?” asked Iggy. Iggy was the sort of elf who did not easily part with his money. He considered gambling to be broadly similar in enjoyment and outcome as running cash through a paper shredder.

“I don’t know. Enough to make it interesting,” said Sam. “Maybe a hundred bucks?”¹⁰

Iggy turned a little pale. A hundred bucks was a lot of money.

Yugo was staring at the television screen. “Sure, I’m in,” he said.

Sam grinned. Now he had Iggy where he wanted him. “Iggy?” he asked. “Are you in?”

Iggy slowly started to pink up again. His natural optimism was overcoming his fear of losing his stake. The more he thought about it, the more attractive Sam’s proposal became. A hundred bucks was a lot of money, but 200 bucks was twice as much. And, if he won the bet, that is how much more he would have. That was far better than the rate of return he was getting on his North Pole Savings Bonds, which were only paying 4.5% that quarter. With over 400,000 bucks in his portfolio, he decided he could risk this small amount of capital on such a speculative venture, particularly given the potentially high rate of return. There was some risk that he could lose it all, but Iggy decided that if he just studied the competition carefully, he should be able to pick the winner.

He nodded, his confidence growing by the second and said, “ok, I’m in.”

“Great,” said Sam. “Here’s what we’ll do. Every week we’ll pick a winner and a loser. The elf who gets the most correct guesses wins the pot.”

“That sounds fair,” said Iggy.

¹⁰ The standard unit of currency at the North Pole is the ‘buck’. There are ten fawns to a North Pole buck.

“Let’s shake on it, then,” said Sam and the elves each reached out their two hands to the others, forming a little elfian knot of tangled arms.

The elves turned back to the program, watching it more intently than ever.

The next morning, Yugo prepared a chart to keep track of each elf’s weekly picks and running score and hung it on the refrigerator. Each night afterwards was the same. After completing their toymaking tasks, Iggy made popcorn and the elves sat down on the edge of the couch to watch the Audacious Odyssey.

Iggy made tick marks on a spread sheet he had developed, Yugo took notes on a small handheld computer and Sam made frequent trips to the refrigerator to get more snacks.

Friday came, and Iggy was delighted when the Sullivan Sisters of Storm Lake, Iowa were the first group to arrive at Stanley Mission, Saskatchewan. They hugged the genial host of the program, who informed them that the prize for reaching the weekly destination first was an all expense paid trip back to Stanley Mission when the Odyssey was over. The celebration that followed involved more hugging, some fist pumping and more than a little jumping up and down.

There was no celebration however for the Stubing Triplets, of Nogales Arizona. They chose to travel to Stanley Mission by kayak, finishing last. The genial host appeared sincerely saddened to tell them that they were the last group to arrive and, unfortunately, they had been eliminated from the Odyssey.

Iggy scored two points, Yugo got one and Sam got nothing.

JODY WATCHED THE AUDACIOUS ODYSSEY alone that night, and found the Friday episode disappointing for two reasons. First, she was sorry to see the Stubing Triplets finish in last place as she was rather fond of their playful banter and devil may care ways. As soon as they elected to take the kayak across Lac La Ronge instead of the ski plane, she knew that they were in trouble.

The second and most disappointing aspect of the Friday episode of the Audacious Odyssey was that Jody watched it alone. Stig was supposed to be with her, but he had begged off at the last minute, claiming that he had to attend to a personal emergency. When Jody asked about the nature of this emergency and whether there was anything that she could do to help, Stig just said “no, thanks,” and hung up.

The Audacious Odyssey ended with some clips from next week's shows (in which Mr. Gonzalez and his two ex wives were seen trying to steer a dog sled with limited success) and Jody switched channels. She flipped past a football game, an enthusiastic British man selling knives, a rerun of some bumbling cartoon dad and a documentary on seals when her finger froze on the remote control.

The Channel 7 Live News Team was at the scene of Amazing Man's latest appearance. This time the costumed vigilante had tackled a thief who had robbed an ATM customer at gunpoint. Amazing Man had disarmed the gunman with some sort of red metal boomerang with sharp edges and subdued him with a kick to the jaw.

The reporter intoned that Amazing Man had disappeared into the shadows again, without a trace. But that was not entirely true. The camera panned to a shot of the thief being pushed into a police wagon, the tread mark of a large Wellington boot still visible on his face.

There was a 'tsk' from the doorway. Jody turned to see her sister Rhonda standing there, her arms crossed and with a sly smile on her face.

"Oh, hi Rhonda," said Jody.

"All alone on a Friday night, are we?" asked Rhonda smugly. "What happened to that knight in shining armour of yours? Stan wasn't it? Or was it Stu?"

"You know it's Stig, Rhonda. He had to go out. Some sort of an emergency."

"Oh, I see, I see," said Rhonda, in the fakest sympathetic voice she could muster. Then she added, "since you're not doing anything anyway, can you do me a favour?"

Even though they lived in the same house, Rhonda seldom spoke with her little sister. Rhonda only had time for Jody when she needed a favour, usually one involving any or all of her three oversized, rambunctious boys, Ronnie, Donnie and Little Jack.

Jody shrugged. Rhonda was right. She was not doing anything else anyway. "Sure, what is it?"

"Can you pick up the boys from kick-boxing class?"

"Of course," said Jody in a resigned voice. Rhonda had enrolled the boys in a martial arts class so that they would be able to protect themselves from neighbourhood bullies. What Rhonda failed to recognize in her maternal myopia was that Ronnie, Donnie and Little Jack *were* the neighbourhood bullies. Their martial arts training had only empowered

them to greater feats of violence and thuggery than even they could have previously imagined.

“Thanks, sis,” said Rhonda, flipping a set of car keys to Jody. “Class is done in ten minutes.”

Jody grabbed her purse and made her way to Rhonda’s lime green minivan. She started it up and then recoiled as Rhonda’s country music radio station loudly blasted some lamentation of love, trucks and agony at her. She fumbled with the radio knob, reducing the volume so that her ears no longer felt like they were bleeding and then searched for that station that played the cheesy ‘80’s songs.

Master Kim Chee’s Kickboxing Studio was located on the East Side, about thirty blocks away. Jody drove and hummed along with the New Kids, who were pretty old kids now; the Bennetts, a husband and wife duo, who sang about staying together forever and ever but whom had since divorced and each remarried three or four times; and a song about how it was better to die before getting too old, sung by Raging Ricky, a hard drinking guitar player, who had died in 1992, long before he ever got too old.

Jody parked the minivan in front of the studio and went inside. Ronnie, Donnie and Little Jack were just finishing their class. Jody spent a few moments watching them slash through wooden planks with their hands. “Isn’t that great,” she thought, “now the boys are not only highly trained bullies, they are highly trained vandals as well.” Donnie spun around and shattered a plank held out by Ronnie and Little Jack. The boys tossed the splinters aside and laughing, made their way into the change room. The adult class was about to begin.

“Hey Jody, what are you doing here?” Jody spun around at the sound of a familiar voice. It was Rudy, the Saturday night game master. He had just walked into the studio with a gym bag under his arm.

“What am I doing here? What are you doing here?” she asked.

Rudy shrugged. “Al and I have been coming here for a couple of years now. You know, once you reach a certain age, you have to start taking care of yourself.”

Jody looked around. “Is Al here?” she asked.

Rudy shook his head. “Nope. He couldn’t make it tonight. I’ll just have to work out twice as hard, I guess.”

They both laughed. Then another tall man pushed past them into the studio.

“Who’s that?” asked Jody, after the big man entered the changing room.

“Oh, that’s Mr. Hastings. I have no idea what his first name is. He’s one of Master Chee’s best pupils. Fast hands. Kicks like a mule.”

Ronnie, Donnie and Little Jack poured out of the change room, exchanging high fives and marched straight past Jody and out into the parking lot. Mr. Hastings came out of the change room right behind them and began working over a punching bag. Jody could not help but notice how big his feet were. She also could not help but notice that while the other students were dressed in white uniforms, Mr. Hastings wore an orange jacket, secured with a red belt. His hands were a blur, and every once in a while, he spun around and delivered a ferocious kick to the bag.

“Wow,” she said.

“Tell me about it,” sighed Rudy. “I have to spar with the guy. I wish Al was here tonight. He’s pretty good, too. You’d be surprised.”

Jody nodded. “Well, enjoy your class,” she said. Rudy gave her a little wave and made his own way into the changing room. She returned to the minivan to find her three enormous nephews leaning out of the windows, taunting passersby and laughing uproariously.

“Hey, you guys, knock it off,” said Jody as she climbed into the driver’s seat.

“Oooooooooooh,” said Ronnie.

“We better do what Auntie Jody says,” said Donnie.

“Or maybe she’ll give us a spanking!” shouted Little Jack, who, truth be told, would not have minded a spanking from his Aunt Jody one little bit.

“Hey look, it’s Amazing Man!” said Jody, pointing out the front window. The three boys stared out the window in silence.

Jody smiled. “Ha! Made you look,” she said. Jody backed out of the parking lot and turned onto the street. The boys looked at each other in confused silence; a silence that thankfully lasted the rest of the way home.



WEEK PASSED, AND THEN ANOTHER. The Audacious Odyssey played out much as Iggy anticipated it would. The Gilbert Brothers were the first to arrive at Key Largo (by airboat) and the first to reach Machu Piccu (by llama). Unfortunately, the beauty pageant queens got lost on the Overseas Highway and were the last group to make it to Key Largo where, unfortunately, they were eliminated from the Audacious Odyssey.

The three waiters from Minnesota, Jeff, Bob and Tank, were the last group to make it to Peru, but instead of journeying to Machu Piccu, the lost city of the Incas, they mistakenly traveled to Pachu Miccu, the city of lost Incas. Once they arrived, they tried to get directions out, but all of the people there, being lost themselves, were no help at all.

Iggy and Yugo both collected three more points. Sam did not get any.

Thousands of miles away in New Bedlam, Jody found herself watching another episode of the Audacious Odyssey by herself. She was not surprised when the Gilbert Brothers finished first again. They always seemed to know where they were going. "Imagine that," she thought, "men who really did not need to ask for directions."

She was also not surprised to be watching the program alone. It was how she had spent the last three Friday nights. Stig was working late at the record store. Or so he said.

She switched to the news right after the Audacious Odyssey ended. Most nights the news led off with whatever amazing thing that Amazing Man had done that evening. One night an old lady told the story of how he tripped up a purse snatcher, another night an old man related how he had chased off a couple of those darn kids what was making nothing but tribble. At least, that is what it sounded like.

But the story this night was different. Tonight, as the old man might say, there was tribble downtown. This was not particularly unusual for a Friday night in downtown New Bedlam. Tribble was usually pretty easy to find there.

This time, the tribble began with an alarm at Krazy Freddie's Stereo Sales and Service, a brick store on the corner of Main and Event. Three hoods, wearing hooded sweatshirts, were carrying electronic equipment through a shattered storefront window, when Amazing Man stepped out of the shadows and called out to them, "stop thieves! Stop and surrender yourself to Captain Justice!"

"Who's Captain Justice?" asked one of the hooded hoods. The hooded hood next to him shrugged, while balancing three DVD players in his arms.

"I thought he was supposed to be Amazing Guy or somethin'", said the other hooded hood, who was, by far, the biggest hood of the three.

Amazing Man lowered his fists for a moment. "No, blackguard, not Amazing Guy, Amazing Man. It's Amazing Man," he said. He raised his fists again.

"That's right," said the first hooded hood. "It's Amazing Man."

“So who’s this Captain Justice?” asked the second hooded hood, the one with the DVD players in his arms.

“Beats me,” said the third hooded hood.

“Look, it doesn’t matter,” said Amazing Man. “Just surrender yourselves, okay?”

The three hooded hoods looked at each other and then they all looked over Amazing Man’s shoulder. They saw something there that Amazing Man had not seen. A fourth hooded hood, returning from loading video game consoles into the gang’s truck. Not only was this hooded hood bigger yet than the other three, he also had a crowbar in his hand. A crowbar he swung with devastating force at Amazing Man.

The crowbar made a cartoonish THWUNK! sound as it struck Amazing Man in the torso. Amazing Man let out an involuntary cartoonish OOF! sound as he fell to the pavement. The hooded hood swung the crowbar again. Another THWUNK! another OOF! and Amazing Man rolled over in agony.

A siren sounded from some distance away. The hooded hoods ran to their truck with their ill-gotten goods, stopping to kick Amazing Man as they passed.

The hero slowly rose to his knees, groaning with every movement. A thin trickle of blood ran down the sleeve of his shirt and dripped onto the pavement. The sirens were drawing closer and Amazing Man struggled to rise to his feet. He carefully pushed one Wellington forward, wobbled, and then took another step. He reached the street corner and fell down.

The sirens were drawing closer and he had only a few moments before they would arrive. Sweat poured into his eyes and he pulled aside the ski goggles and bicycle helmet. He threw off his cape, reached into the pack on his waist and pulled out a thin nylon jacket, which he pulled over his blood soaked spandex shirt. He crawled across the street, leaving his cape, helmet and goggles behind. He collapsed in the middle of the road, unable to go any further.

He turned his head and noticed a manhole cover just within his reach. He struggled to pry the cover off, then rolled into the manhole and dropped out of sight, just as a police car pulled up to the looted store. Two eager members of the NBPd leapt from the car and began investigating the scene.

A few minutes later, a white van with a satellite dish on the roof arrived, and a grim looking Lou Sprocker of the Channel 7 Live News Team climbed out, looking for a face he could shove a microphone into. It only took a moment to find that perfect face. One with short dark hair

attached to the body of a police officer with a red pleather cape in one hand and a helmet and ski goggles in the other.

Lou Sprocker waved to his camera man and a moment later, the young police officer was staring at a bright spotlight and Lou Sprocker's microphone.

"And just what is that you've got there, officer?" asked Lou Sprocker grimly.

The policeman held up the cape, "Well, I really can't comment on an ongoing investigation," he said.

"It looks like pleather, wouldn't you say, officer?" pressed Lou Sprocker.

The policeman looked down at the cape. "I really couldn't say, sir. It's still being investigated."

"Must have been expensive," said Lou Sprocker. "Wouldn't you say this is a very expensive garment, officer?" He flipped the microphone back to the policeman, who shrugged helplessly.

"And these ... items ... were all abandoned at the scene of the crime, were they?"

"I really shouldn't comment any more. I've only just arrived myself," the policeman said. Another policeman knelt down and took a photograph of a bloodstain on the pavement.

Lou Sprocker's eyes bulged out for an instant, but he pulled them back in with grim professionalism. He waved at the cameraman, who zoomed in on the bloodstain, then panned to follow a trail of blood drops into the middle of the street.

A policeman stepped into the shot to block the camera's angle, but Lou Sprocker smoothly slipped in, faced the blazing spotlight and in the grimmest voice he could muster, concluded, "There you have it. An expensive pleather cape. A helmet and some goggles. And the man's own blood on the ground. Tonight, a hero has been defeated."

The words "A Hero Defeated" appeared in large white letters across the bottom of Jody's television screen. She turned off the television and picked up the telephone.

Stig's line rang eleven times before Jody gave up and hung up the phone.

THE MAN STRUGGLED DOWN THE STAIRS and fell onto the floor. He was soaking wet and his clothing reeked of sewage. He lay there for several minutes, breathing heavily. Somewhere, a telephone was ringing.

Slowly he rose to his knees and shrugged off the thin nylon jacket. He touched his side gently, then grimaced with pain. He caught his breath and carefully pulled the orange spandex shirt over his head. The shirt was torn in places, and stained with blood and muck. He dropped in onto the floor in a sodden heap.

“I think I’ll be staying in for the next few days,” he grunted to himself. He slowly crawled to the table where the stacks of Captain Justice books lay in neat rows. He pulled one from the top of the nearest stack¹¹ and slipped it out of its mylar sleeve, taking great care not to mar the cover with mud. “Might as well catch up on my reading.”

He opened the book and stared blankly at the single panel illustration on the front page for several minutes. Then he slowly lay back onto the cement floor and slipped into blissful unconsciousness.

NOBODY SAW AMAZING MAN DURING THE next three weeks. Millions of people did see the next episodes of the Audacious Odyssey, which was growing in popularity with each passing day.

From Maccu Piccu, the seven remaining groups made their way to Tiera Del Fuego, stopping to ride a mule cart in Bolivia and to snowboard at the La Hoya Resort in the Andes. The Gilbert Brothers made a wrong turn in Paraguay, which allowed the three swimsuit models from Anaheim to finish in first place. They won a small cash prize, which they celebrated with a good dealing of hopping, hollering and hugging. The Gilbert Brothers were able to get back on course, and slipped across the finish line just ahead of the beleaguered Mr. Gonzalez and his two ex-wives, who unfortunately, were eliminated from the competition.

¹¹ Captain Justice No. 414 (1988), *Captain Justice and the Turtle Men*. In this issue, Captain Justice confronts an alien race of humanoid turtles. The aliens are an advance party of an invasion force intent on taking over the world. Captain Justice ultimately thwarts the invasion by knocking the Turtle Men onto their backs, where they are seen in the last panel screaming, “Help! We’ve fallen and we can’t get up!”

Iggy had expected the Gilbert Brothers to finish in first place for a third straight week. He did pick the Gonzalezes to finish last, so he still collected a single point. Yugo also collected one point. Sam forgot to submit any picks and his score for the week was entered at zero.

The events of the Audacious Odyssey were the talk of the workshop each morning. Every episode was hashed and rehashed by elves as they fastened wheels to mule carts or polished snowboards. A female elf from the mailroom reported that toy blimp requests were up 313%. This was generally attributed to the daring blimp ride the Odyssey contestants had taken over the Devil's Throat at Iguazu Falls (*la Gargantua del Diablo*).

Iggy, Yugo and Sam were deployed to the newly established 'Blimp Team'. Though Yugo considered that blimps were, in principle, archaic, Iggy welcomed the change from making trains. Sam just blew up blimp balloons and thought about his lunch break.

Excitement built throughout the week, as the six remaining Odysseans journeyed by steam liner around the Cape of Good Hope, and then crossed Madagascar in dune buggies they had to build themselves. From there, they hired speed boats for the final sprint to Zanzibar, where Odyssey was scheduled to end for the week on Friday.

Friday night found Iggy, Yugo and Sam seated in front of the big 78 inch plasma television in the common room of Elves Barracks B, joined now by thirty or forty other elves, each cheering on their personal favourites in the Odyssey. Quite a few wore T-shirts with pictures of the swimsuit models from Anaheim. They roared as the Gilbert Brothers overtook Jordan, Pat and Terry, the three friends of indeterminate gender, and watched in silent horror when the speed boat carrying the old team capsized.

In the end, Lou, Hans and Lena, the bartenders from Toledo, scrambled up the beach in first place. The elves cheered the arrival of each group, reserving respectful applause for the tearful appearance of the old team, Agatha, Betty and Morris, who never could recover from their boating accident. Unfortunately, they were the last group to arrive, and, it is sorry to say, they were eliminated from the Odyssey.

Iggy and Yugo each collected another point. Sam scored zero.

It was mid November, and weekend shifts had begun at the work shop. The work shop is not, as many people thing, a cozy snow covered cottage with smoke drifting lazily from a small brick chimney. The work shop is actually a great number of cozy snow covered cottages, each serving a different function in Santa Claus' toy manufacture and distribution empire. New specialized buildings appear each year, such as the Porcelain Building Works™ and the Board Games Factory™, resulting in

a sprawling maze of little workshops, with busy elves scurrying back and forth among them.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam were pulling a shift in the fruitcake bakery. They mixed candied fruit and brandy into the thick dough, pressed it into square pans, then stacked the finished products like bricks along the back wall of the bakery. Sam liked working in the bakery because of the easy availability of thick dough, candied fruit and brandy. Most elves sweated off a pound or two during a shift in the hot bakery, but Sam, who frequently sampled the cakes at each stage of their production, always left the bakery fuller and fatter than when he entered it.

“Don’t you think you’ve had enough?” asked Iggy, as Sam scooped a big spoonful of sticky brown dough into his mouth.

“It’s just a taste test,” said Sam, between chews. “We can’t be shipping out unpalatable fruitcake, can we?”

“It’s supposed to be unpalatable,” said Yugo. “It’s fruitcake.”

Sam shook his head. “Not on my watch. Every cake that leaves this bakery will be Sam approved.” He sprinkled some candied fruit onto one of the cakes, and then flipped a red one into his mouth.

“Do you even know what that is?” asked Iggy.

“Cherry, I think,” said Sam.

Yugo snorted. “You wish. We can’t keep cherries fresh at the North Pole.”

“Then what is it?” asked Sam, eyeing a green one for a few seconds before eating it.

“They’re rutabagas soaked in sugar and food colouring,”¹² explained Iggy. “They keep forever.”

“Really?” asked Sam. “I never knew that.” He turned a piece of coloured rutabaga in his fingers a few times and then tossed it into his mouth. “Tasty though,” he said.

Each day, the elves worked double shifts, making airplanes, doll houses and fruitcake. Each night they gathered to watch the progress of the Audacious Odyssey. On Monday, the remaining groups departed

¹² The rutabaga (also known as the yellow turnip) is a root vegetable, which is used in a variety of ill-tasting stews and casseroles. The North Pole is not the only place that uses rutabagas in place of cherries in its fruitcakes. Almost every commercially produced fruitcake in North America is made with rutabagas. When you are eating fruitcake this Christmas, you are really eating candied turnips. I bet that you did not know that.

Zanzibar by dhow, making a rocky ride to the Tanzanian coast. On Tuesday, they drove old rusted jeeps through the Savannah, where they had to milk a zebra. On Wednesday, they travelled up the Nile by reed boat and rode camels through the pyramids on Thursday. On Friday, the elves were joined by the largest crowd yet, who assembled in Elves Barracks B to see which group would win that week's stage.



Iggy liked the chances of the Sullivan Sisters. Yugo had picked the Gilbert Brothers. Sam chose the swimsuit models. Sam watched the program from the biggest chair in the room, with a large bowl of popcorn on his lap, and a smaller bowl of candied rutabagas on the table beside him.

A dramatic journey across the Mediterranean ended at the ruins of the palace of Knossos, on Crete. The palace is an enormous building with twisting hallways that lead into and out of hundreds of rooms. The genial host walked in front of the ruins of the old building and explained that it was once the

location of the legendary Labyrinth, which housed the dreaded minotaur, and which was slain by the great Greek hero, Theseus.

“Pfffft” snorted Sam. “Theseus was nothing special. You want a real hero? Give me Perseus any day.”

“Perseus?” asked Iggy. “What was so great about Perseus?”

“Only everything,” replied Sam. “He was the guy who took on Medusa. Tricked her into looking at his polished shield and turned her to stone. Now that’s using the old bean.” Sam tapped his temple with his pudgy forefinger.

“Theseus was still pretty good,” interjected Yugo.

“Oh come on,” said Sam. “Theseus was a moron. Don’t you remember that on his way home from Crete he was supposed to put up the white sails if he was okay, but he forgot and when his old man, Aegus, saw his ship return flying black sails, he was so grief stricken he threw himself off a cliff. Some hero.”

Yugo nodded. “You’re right. That was pretty dumb.”

“Perseus was a better hero,” agreed Iggy.

A group of other elves shushed loudly. “Can’t you see we are trying to watch the show?” said the tallest one.

“We can’t hear a thing with all of your blather,” said the smartest one.

“You three will argue about anything,” said the chubby one.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam sunk sheepishly into the big sofa and stared quietly at the big television screen. There were no minotaurs or Greek heroes on this night, but each group still had to work their way through the ancient maze to the center, where the genial host of the program was waiting to greet them.

To Iggy’s dismay, the Gilbert Brothers reached the center first, followed closely by the Sullivan Sisters. The swimsuit models finished last. Iggy collected one point, Yugo got two, and Sam got nothing, though he finished the last of the rutabagas before the closing credits rolled.

JODY SAW THE SULLIVAN SISTERS RETAKE THE LEAD in the Audacious Odyssey from her usual spot at the end of Rhonda’s sofa. This pleased her for two reasons. First, she was cheering for the Sullivan Sisters and was happy to see them winning (and taking the prize, which this week was a life size marble statue of a minotaur). Second, for the first Friday in weeks, Stig was at the end of Rhonda’s sofa, too.

Stig’s head was resting on Jody’s shoulder. She looked down on him gently. His eyes were closed and he was purring softly with each breath. Things would be just right, if it were not for the fact that Grampa Les was seated at the other end of the sofa.

“Too bad ‘bout them swimmer models,” said Grampa Les. “They were some o’ yer fine lookin’ lasses.”

“They’re way too young for you Grampa Les,” said Jody.

“I dinner know ‘bout ‘dat,” replied Grampa Les. “This ol’ body, it still got it some livin’ left inner.”

Jody laughed.

“Now switcher over to yer news pergrim,” demanded Grampa Les. “I wanna see what yer ‘Mazin’ Man be gettin’ hissell all upp’in’ to.”

Jody picked up the remote and flipped to Channel 7, where Lou Sprocker was gravely updating his viewers on the Amazing Man ‘situation.’ A graphic over his left shoulder read “Amazing Man Missing – Day 21”.

Stig perked up and rubbed his eyes. “Amazing Man, eh? I wonder what ever happened to him?” he said.

Grampa Les tapped his foot on the ground, anxiously. “It gonna be aright, yull see,” he said. “Mazin’ Man gonna be jess dandy.”

Jody looked Stig in the eye. “Do you really wonder what happened to Amazing Man, Stig?” she asked firmly.

Stig looked at her blankly. “Doesn’t everybody?” he asked.

Jody pursed her lips and sat thoughtfully. Like everybody else, she wondered what had become of Amazing Man. His disappearance had been both mysterious and ominous. Nobody, not the police or the Channel 7 Live News Team, had any idea who he was or where he had gone.

Jody had only seen Stig twice in the three weeks that Amazing Man had been gone. When he finally answered his phone, he told Jody that he had the flu, or something even worse.

“Worse than the flu?” asked Jody.

Stig coughed. “I dunno. Pneumonia maybe. Or ebola. I feel terrible.”

“I’m coming over,” Jody announced.

“You can’t,” Stig stammered.

“Why not?”

“I’m sick.”

“I know. That’s why I’m coming over.”

“Then *you’ll* get sick,” said Stig.

“I don’t care,” said Jody.

“Well, I do. You don’t want to feel like this, believe me.” Stig sneezed for extra effect.

“You should see a doctor then.”

“I’ll be okay in a few days. I just need to rest. I’ve been working too hard. Doing too much ...” Jody did not know what to make of that. Stig sounded delirious. Usually, his idea of working too hard was watching an entire hockey game that went into overtime.

“Stig, I’m worried about you. Something is not right,” said Jody.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine. I’ll call you in a couple of days.”

But Stig did not call. So, a couple of days later, Jody marched over to his house and rang his doorbell until he answered. When he opened the door, he was hunched over and wearing a worn white bathrobe.

"You look terrible," said Jody.

"Thanks," said Stig, weakly. "You don't look half bad yourself."

"I brought you soup," she said, holding a blue porcelain bowl in front of her.

Stig smiled weakly. "That's great."

He gestured for her to come inside. He shuffled slowly out of her way and she set the bowl on a table. She turned to Stig and reached out her arms to hug him. Stig took a step back and said, "careful, my ribs are killing me. I was up coughing all night."

Jody pressed her hand on his forehead. "You're freezing cold," she said.

"I know," said Stig. "I can't seem to get warm anymore. But it will get better soon. I'm sure of it."

"Oh really?"

"Yes, really. But I do need to lie down now." He slowly guided her back to the door. "It was nice to see you and I am feeling a little better, honest. I'll call you soon."

"But ... " began Jody, but she was already on the front step. Stig waved at her feebly and shut the door.

Jody stood on the front step for almost ten minutes before she finally gave up and went home. And although Stig did phone the next day, and he did tell her he was feeling much better, something about the conversation left her cold. As cold as Stig felt when she touched him.

They spoke again over the next several days, but it was not until that Friday night that Stig said he was well enough to come over. He immediately sat on the sofa and pulled a thick wool blanket over him. He rested on Jody's shoulder while they watched the Audacious Odyssey. He was still cold, and even with the blanket on, he shivered a little from time to time.

Lou Sprocker was still grimly reciting the facts surrounding Amazing Man's disappearance. He had, in the last three weeks, been rumoured to be in St Tropez with any number of nubile young celebrities, on a secret government mission overseas and recording an album with his new band. However, none of these rumours was substantiated in any way, a fact which did not prevent Lou Sprocker from exploring each one in some detail.

"Wonner whennat new record o' his be comin' out?" asked Grampa Les.

"Probably not for quite a while," said Jody gently. Stig just grunted.

“Well I wanna git me one o’ them records fer sure, I do,” said Grampa Les. “Betcher that ‘Mazin’ Man can sing like yer choir o’ angles.”

Jody nudged Stig, who seemed to be dozing off again. “Have you phoned your mother yet?” she asked.

Stig’s eyes popped open. “My mother? Why in the world would I want to phone her?”

“About Christmas Dinner,” said Jody. “You told me you’d phone and invite her.”

Stig turned a little pale. “Oh. Well, not exactly,” he said.

“Well, how exactly?”

“Um ... it’s like this, which would be, I would say, *exactly*, that I ... ” he paused and took a long breath. “I haven’t actually phoned her. Not as such. Not yet. But I will, I will.”

“Stig! You said you would phone her. Christmas is just a few weeks away now!”

Stig sighed, “I’ll call her, I’ll call her,” he mumbled.

“When?” asked Jody.

“Soon,” said Stig. Jody glared at him. “Tomorrow.”

“Oh never mind, I’ll do it myself,” said Jody, and she reached for the phone. Stig covered his head with the blanket and moaned quietly while Jody punched in the number.

Stig’s mother answered before the first ring ended. “Who is this?” she asked.

“Oh, hello Mrs. Hawkins,” said Jody. Everybody called Stig’s mother Mrs. Hawkins. Jody did not even know her first name. “It’s Jody calling.... ”

“Jody who?” snapped Mrs. Hawkins.

“Jody Noles. You know, Stig’s girlfriend.”

“Oh. You. What do you want?” The temperature in the room seemed to fall a couple of degrees. Jody noticed that Stig was shivering again.

“Well,” began Jody. The temperature was still dropping. “Stig and I are planning to make dinner this Christmas. You know, for family and a few friends. We would both like it if you would come.”

The line was silent for several moments. Then Mrs. Hawkins said, “fine”. There was another long silence. Then she asked, “Is there anything else?”

“I guess that’s everything. I’m glad – we’re both glad that you can make it.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Hawkins. And the line went dead. Phone calls with Mrs. Hawkins were always like that. When Mrs. Hawkins decided a conversation was over, it was over. Good-byes were an unnecessary formality at that point.

Jody stared at the lifeless receiver in her hand and then set it down on the cradle. She turned to Stig and smiled. “Good news,” she said. “Your mother is coming for Christmas dinner.”

Stig nodded from beneath his blanket and moaned a little.

“That Missus Hawkins is one o’ yer handsome wimmen, she is,” said Grampa Les with a big grin.

“You’re coming for Christmas dinner too, aren’t you Grampa Les?” asked Jody.

“I would ner misser fer nuttin’, I would ner,” answered Grampa Les. Jody took that for a ‘yes’.

Over the next week, she called the rest of Stig’s friends. Rudy jumped at the idea, as did Alert when she finally reached him. Herschel declined, he was going to be out of town at a winter solstice celebration with the Most Honest and Honourable Brotherhood of Druids. Lance also sent his regrets, he had about 300 more hours to bill to meet his targets that year. He expected to be working right through Christmas.

Jody looked down at her notes. Her guest list was shaping up nicely. But, would she ever hear from Iggy, Yugo and Sam? She wondered if they had even received her letter. She wondered what they were doing right now ...

IGGY, YUGO AND SAM WERE DOING THE THING that all of the elves of the North Pole did in the first week of December. They were making toys. And when the toys were made, they made more toys. With the ‘No Child Left Behind’ rules in place, the work shop was running far behind schedule and everyone was pulling double and triple shifts. They made toys all day and at night, while they slept, they dreamed of making toys.

The only respite they took from their toymaking duties was the hour they spent each night in the common room, watching the Audacious Odyssey. Then it was back to the workshop, for more toys. The Audacious Odyssey had become the mainstay of North Pole existence. Toymaking

was just how they passed the time after one episode ended until the next began.

It had been another exciting week in the Odyssey. The groups traversed Greece by chariot, took an explosively frightening bus ride through Iraq and Afghanistan, and then hitchhiked across the Indian border before finally racing bullock carts across the rocky terrain to that week's finish line in Bangalore. Lou, Hans and Lena arrived first, followed closely by the Gilbert Brothers and the Sullivan Sisters. Jordan, Pat and Terry, the three friends of indeterminate gender from Miami, were well behind and, unfortunately, they were eliminated from the competition.

Iggy collected another two points. Yugo scored one. Sam got nothing.

HE TIED OFF THE FINAL STITCH and lifted up the orange shirt. "That should do it," he said. The bloodstains were gone and the mud had been carefully bleached from the big letter 'J' on the front. The last rip had been sewn closed. It was heavier than before. The sides, shoulders and forearms were newly reinforced with special padding.

He tugged it on and then bent over to pull on his modified spandex leggings. He winced and caught his breath. His ribs still ached when he moved suddenly. The leggings were heavier now, too, with sturdy pads sewn in around the waist. He had ordered the pads online from a medical supply company; they were designed to be worn by the elderly to prevent injury, but he was sure that they would suit him just fine.

He wriggled into the tights and then stood up straight. His uniform was a lot stiffer now. It would take some time before he was used to it. He punched the air a few times, working in the new padding. It was a lot bulkier, too. Indeed, the only honest answer to the question 'does this outfit make my butt look fat?' was 'yes'.

Stacked on the desk, still in their boxes, were a shiny new red helmet and goggles. A new red pleather cape, very expensive, hung on the wall. Beneath it stood the only part of his uniform that was unchanged; his reliable red Wellingtons.

He leaned on the desk and flipped on the police scanner. While it warmed up, he pulled the new helmet from its box and placed it on his head. It felt good there. It felt right. He pulled the cape down from the wall and, with his usual flourish, clipped it to his neck.

The police scanner crackled to life. Amazing Man smiled. He was ready now. It was time to get back to work.

THE MORNING PAPERS WERE FILLED WITH NEWS of Amazing Man's return. "**HE'S BACK!**" screamed the New Bedlam Times-Enquirer in the kind of type usually reserved for declarations of war, moon landings and the birth of celebrity babies. "**OUR HERO RETURNS!**" proclaimed the Post-Interloper. Even the Weekly Coupon Clipper carried the story, under the banner "**AMAZING MAN – AMAZING DEALS!**"

The first sighting of Amazing Man was by a burglar who was trying to crowbar open the back door of Hank's Bait and Tackle on 13th Street. The sighting lasted only a few seconds, as all the burglar saw next were stars and cartoon birds that circled his head for over an hour afterwards. The only sign that Amazing Man had been there at all was a large Wellington boot print.

Scarcely twenty minutes later, Amazing Man broke up a serious assault. Three young thugs were attacking another young man. The victim was hopelessly outnumbered and his assailants laughed with each blow that fell. Then Amazing swung through the middle of the conflict on a thin rope, scooping up the victim and lifting him from harm's way. He dropped him several feet away and then turned and levelled the three attackers on his backswing.

An hour later he was seen downtown, knocking out a car thief. Soon after he was uptown, breaking up a drug deal. On his way through midtown, he returned a lost dog to its owners.

Grateful citizens throughout the city told of a man in orange and red who appeared, as if from nowhere, and saved their persons, property and pets. Viewers of the Channel 7 news claimed that Lou Sprocker even smiled, as he reported the news of Amazing Man's sudden return.

GRAMPA LES COULD NOT CONTAIN HIS JOY over pancakes the next morning. "Didjer see ther papers, Jody? Didjer see 'em?" he asked, spraying pancakes and maple syrup across the room as Jody walked into the kitchen and began searching for the coffee pot.

"Did I see what?" asked Jody. She found the pot and began searching for her mug. She liked to have her coffee out of the same coffee mug every morning. She found it at the back of the cupboard, the mug with the big sleepy looking dog on it under the words "Me Woof U". Stig had bought it for her at Walmans one Saturday night, and now she never drank coffee out of anything else.

"Mazin' Man be back! 'Mazin' Man be back!" shouted Grampa Les.

Jody stopped filling her mug and stared at Grampa Les. “What?” she asked.

“I told you what ‘dat ‘Mazin’ Man was gonna be jes dandy an’ I was right I was,” said Grampa Les. “Grippin’ bonnets by Murphy June ‘Mazin’ Man be back!”

He held up the front page for Jody to see. “**AMAZING MAN STRIKES BACK!**” the headline practically shouted at her. She blinked her eyes a couple of times, then took the paper and stared at the article.

“He was everywhere last night,” she whispered. At the same time, she wondered where Stig had been the night before. She knew he had not been with her. Working again, he had told her.

Heavy footsteps pounded down the stairs and Ronnie, Donnie and Little Jack ran into the kitchen. They were not laughing they way they usually did. In fact, they looked almost ... serious. Ronnie opened the freezer door.

“Have we got any ice?” asked Donnie.

Little Jack filled a bag with ice and held it to his cheek.

“Rough night?” asked Jody.

“The worst,” said Ronnie.

“You have no idea,” said Donnie. He had a vicious looking scrape over his eye.

“Hey, is that the paper?” asked Little Jack. Grampa Les waved it at the boys.

“Give her here,” said Ronnie.

Grampa Les glared at the them. Usually when he glared at them they just laughed and stole his dentures or his tri-focals. But this time they did not even giggle.

“Please Grampa Les,” begged Donnie.

“Yeah,” said Little Jack. “We need to read the want ads. We’ve decided we need to get proper jobs.”

“Something safe,” said Ronnie.

“Something secure,” said Donnie.

“Something *honest*,” said Little Jack.

Jody and Grampa Les each stared at the boys in astonishment. The paper fell from Grampa Les’ astonished fingers onto a table, which, if it


could feel anything at all, was experiencing astonishment itself at that very moment.

The boys pulled out the classified section and ran back up the stairs, clutching their ice packs in their hands and talking quietly to each other.

“Purple Mary butter knuckle fishstick,” cursed Grampa Les softly. “I’m a thinkin’ what my horn jes got rightly swoggled jes now.”

Jody shook her head in a daze. “Mine too, Grampa Les. My horn is rightly swoggled, too,” she said. The newspaper stood like a tent in the middle of the table. Her eyes drifted back to the lead article and to the last line, which concluded, “Amazing Man Busts up Gang ... see p.4”

She looked back up the stairs. “I wonder ... ” she said to herself.

 ANOTHER FRIDAY NIGHT AT THE NORTH POLE, another gathering in Elves Barracks B for the next instalment of the Audacious Odyssey. The three groups that were left had raced from India along the coast of Myanmar, and from there to Singapore, and then on to Borneo by outrigger canoe. They took a party boat to Bali, chartered a sailboat to Christmas Island, and then scrambled to hire a hydrofoil for the sprint to Cape Leveque, Australia, the final stop for the week.

The workshop employed only a skeleton staff that evening; which is not to say that the staff was comprised of skeletons, but rather that only a minimal roster of elves worked during the hour that the Audacious Odyssey aired. And even they kept an eye on the progress of the Odyssey on a small television mounted in the corner of the workshop.

The Sullivan Sisters were the first to set foot on the beach, but were overtaken by the Gilbert Brothers during the long dash to the finish line. The Toledo bartenders, Lou, Hans and Lena, were the last team to cross the line and were eliminated from the Odyssey.

Iggy claimed two more points. Yugo settled for just one and Sam got none. But he did enjoy another bowl of candied rutabagas before the show was done.

The week passed slowly, like the week before Christmas will, with anticipation building with each passing day. But it was not Christmas that the elves awaited, but rather, it was the next instalment of the Audacious Odyssey. Only two teams remained, the Gilberts and the Sullivans, and this week would determine the winner of the Odyssey.

The elves of the North Pole were evenly divided. One half of them, give or take a few, were cheering on the Sullivan Sisters, while the other half, take or give a few, supported the Gilbert Brothers. By Monday, the elves had abandoned their traditional green and red velvet uniforms, with those cheering for the Sullivans wearing pink scarves, caps and pointy toed boots to work and the Gilbert supporters dressed in blue.

On Tuesday, the *Odyssey* travelled to Wellington,¹³ New Zealand by steamship from Tasmania. On Wednesday, a fight broke out in the Egg Nog Pub™ when the Sullivans took a late lead, reaching Tahiti ten minutes ahead of the Gilberts. But, the Gilberts pulled ahead on Thursday, arriving in Lahaina by whaling boat twenty minutes before the Sullivans.

The final episode of the *Audacious Odyssey* aired three days before Christmas. It was an extended three-hour episode, broadcast live to a worldwide audience. It would be remembered as one of the highest rated television programs in history.

It was certainly the highest rated television program in North Pole history. The workshop was shut down completely when the broadcast began at 8 PM sharp.¹⁴

There had never been so many people crammed into *Elves Barracks B*. The Fire Chief would surely have shut the place down, except that he was off duty and was sitting on a bar stool pressed up against the south wall. He was wearing pink overalls and cheering loudly for the Sullivan Sisters.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam were seated in their usual places on the big sofa at the front of the room. Iggy was dressed all in pink, Yugo in blue. Sam was wearing a big pink button on his vest, a fact which Iggy found vaguely troubling.

¹³ Wellington is the capital of New Zealand. It has nothing whatever to do with Wellington boots. Well, maybe one thing, the city and the boots are both named for the same gentleman, Arthur Wellesley, the first Duke of Wellington. And maybe one other thing, Wellington boots are very popular attire throughout New Zealand, particularly among the sheep farmers. Aside from those two things, the city and the boots are entirely distinct.

¹⁴ This is not completely correct. Because all time zones converge at the North Pole, the various buildings that encompass Santa's Workshop actually span 16 of them. It was only those parts of the workshop occupying the hours of 8-11 PM that were shut down. The rest of the workshop remained operational. Until 8 PM.

For the last half hour, elves had been steadily streaming into the common room, dressed in pink and blue. Then, when it appeared that there was no room for even one more elf, the door was slowly pushed open and a big man dressed in red worked his way into the common room.

“Santa Claus!” the elves shouted with one voice.

“Ho ho ho,” said Santa Claus. He was wearing a blue cap with the letter ‘G’ on it. On his feet he wore an old pair of blue suede shoes with two inch platform heels, freshly polished for the occasion. He worked his way to the front of the room. Several elves got up to give Santa their seats, but he refused them all with a hearty chuckle. He found a tiny patch of carpet behind Sam’s big green chair and settled in there to watch the program. He reached a big hand into Sam’s bowl and scooped out a large fistful of candied rutabagas. Sam said nothing, but pulled the bowl a little closer to his side.

The face of the genial host of the Audacious Odyssey filled the giant plasma screen at the end of the common room. A hush fell over the crowd of elves as the host said, “two months ago an odyssey began. An Audacious Odyssey that took ten teams around the world by every means conceivable. Tonight, that Odyssey will end. The first team to arrive here, will win the grand prize.”

The camera pulled back to show the host standing beneath a giant road sign that said “Gilroy, California - Garlic Capital of the World.” Then the scene shifted to an aerial shot taken from a helicopter of the final two teams, the Gilbert Brothers and the Sullivan Sisters, each riding Segway scooters and speeding south on Highway 101. They were less than forty yards apart.

The elves began cheering and stamping their feet. One of them played a trombone.




ANOTHER FRIDAY NIGHT IN DOWNTOWN NEW BEDLAM. A light snowfall dusted the quiet streets. Christmas was only three days away.

Amazing Man sat on a rooftop overlooking the East End. Big fluffy snowflakes swirled around his gleaming red helmet. His orange goggles were slightly misted. He wrapped his cape around his shoulders to ward off the chill. He slowly gazed up and down 13th Street, which normally had one of the highest crime rates in the city. But on this night, traffic

was light and there was no crime of any kind to be seen. There were no muggings, no break-ins. No robberies. All was calm; all was bright.

“How about that,” he said aloud. “Maybe there is some Christmas spirit in this place after all.”

He sat watching the peaceful streets for another hour before he stood up and shook the snow from his cape. He slid down the side of the building and made his way home.

 ANOTHER FRIDAY NIGHT IN RHONDA'S LIVING ROOM. Jody and Grampa Les sat side by side on the sofa, watching the Audacious Odyssey. Jody was wearing her good pink sweater and had a pink ribbon in her hair. Grampa Les was wearing his old blue sweater, the one with the holes in the elbows, and his fishing cap. His fishing cap was neither blue nor pink, but it kept his head warm.

Ronnie, Donnie and Little Jack sat together on the other side of the room, quietly eating popcorn. All three were dressed in pink.

They were all staring at the television, transfixed by the spectacle of six people racing Segways down a California freeway at their maximum speed of 12.5 miles per hour. They were passing through Morgan Hill, battling for position with only ten miles to go. The Sullivan Sisters were slowly gaining ground. The gap had shrunk from forty yards to less than twenty.

“Go git yer giddy up and go!” shouted Grampa Les.

“Yeah!” shouted Ronnie.

“Get your giddy up!” shouted Donnie.

“And go!” shouted Little Jack.

Jody smiled. In the last week, she had not once found honey poured on her pillow, a mouse in her shoes or ducked to avoid being struck by a flying ninja star. She had no idea what had come over the boys, but the change was a welcome one. She turned her attention back to the television. It looked like the Sullivan Sisters were pulling ahead.

WITH SEVEN MILES TO GO, BERTIE GILBERT could already smell the garlic. He could also smell the three Sullivan Sisters alongside him. He leaned forward on the handlebars, willing the little scooter to go faster. His brothers, Freddy and Ambrose, were only a few feet ahead. It was going to take some fancy manoeuvring to maintain their lead to the end.

Bonnie, Brenda and Belinda Sullivan leaned into the turn, their Segways humming beneath them. They were each 'big-boned' women, dressed in matching pink sweatshirts and blue jeans. They had caught up to Bertie, the last of the Gilbert Brothers. Bonnie reached out and gave him a shove. He turned away slightly and then straightened out again. Bonnie veered closer and pushed him again, this time using both hands while she gripped her own handlebar between her knees. Bertie's Segway spun to the shoulder before he regained control and straightened it out. Bonnie and the other two Sullivan Sisters shot past him. He found himself several yards back, and the gap was widening.

This was nothing new. Bonnie's gap toothed grin and unapologetic pushiness had made her a favourite of Odyssey fans worldwide. And the Gilberts knew, better than most, how pushy Bonnie Sullivan could be. Bonnie had pushed past them time and again during the Odyssey. She had even pushed all three of them off of an airport jetway in Trinidad. "Look out, Freddy!" Bertie shouted over the roar of the traffic, "the pushy one is coming for you!"

Bonnie bore down on Freddie Gilbert, flanked on either side by her two sisters. Freddie weaved from side to side to block their passage, but the Sullivan Sisters were relentless. They matched his every feint and shift in a dance that wound its way down the highway. Finally, their advantage in numbers won out. Freddie shifted to his right to block Belinda and Bonnie swerved around him from the left. She stiff-armed him on the shoulder and his scooter tipped up onto one of its wide rubber wheels. Freddie wobbled frantically before his scooter bounced back down onto the asphalt, but by then, the Sullivans had slipped past him.

Ambrose Gilbert was the biggest and oldest of the Gilbert Brothers. He was prematurely balding and, because of this, was in a bad mood most of the time. His high forehead and unexpectedly ferocious temper tantrums had made him a favorite of Odyssey fans worldwide. He was not one to take being pushed around lightly. The Sullivan Sisters closed in on him, and he could see Bonnie over his shoulder, flexing her arms to get ready for another big push.

But Ambrose was ready. As Bonnie approached him from the right, he leaned back on his Segway, braking slightly. Bonnie reached him sooner

than she expected and Ambrose's elbow was waiting for her. It caught her in the middle of her gap toothed grin, widening the gap there just a little bit. Bonnie grasped her mouth with her hands, causing her to veer sideways and bump into Brenda. Brenda bumped into Belinda and before the three sisters could get reoriented, Bertie and Freddie had overtaken them.

With only five miles to go, crowds were lining each side of the highway, dressed in blue or pink, holding signs and cheering on their preferred team. The six competitors crawled past them, punching, scratching and clawing at each other the whole time. Bonnie pushed Freddie, Ambrose elbowed Brenda, while Bertie and Belinda just tried to stay out of the way.

The smell of garlic was overpowering once they reached the outskirts of Gilroy. The Sullivans had retaken the lead, but the Gilberts were only seconds behind them. The finish line of the Audacious Odyssey was not far off, now. The Sullivans reached the Leaversley Road exit and turned left. The crowds along Leaversley were ten people deep and cheered madly as the Gilberts entered the last stretch.

The genial host of the program was standing on a platform in the middle of the parking lot of an enormous outlet mall. A gigantic Gap store rose behind him, festooned with pink and blue balloons. A length of yellow tape was stretched between two golden poles at either end of the platform. The Sullivans made another left, with the Gilberts in close pursuit. The end was now in sight for each of them, and they bore down on the yellow tape.

With 200 yards to go, the Gilbert Brothers leapt off of their Segways and sprinted for the finish line on foot. The Sullivan Sisters each leaned forward, willing their scooters to go faster. Ambrose ran past Bonnie, digging an elbow into her ribs as he passed. They were all even now, with only a hundred yards left. Who would reach the yellow tape first? It was too close to call.

“**I**T’S THE GILBERTS!” called Yugo, leaping from the sofa. He knocked Sam’s candy bowl from the armrest, scattering the remaining rutabagas across the room. Exactly half of the elves in the common room, give or take a few, roared with delight. Even Santa Claus leapt to his feet, throwing his blue cap into the air and clapping his blue suede heels together. The trombonist blew a few notes of *Three Little Maids From*

School, but was drowned out as the rest of the elves joined in the cheering.

Iggy was downcast, but only for a moment, before he was swept up in the celebration as well. Sam headed behind the bar, put two big bottles filled with red and green liquid on the counter and started pouring. He did not stop pouring until well after midnight.



One elf sat down at a piano and he and the trombonist jammed a frenzied medley of Christmas carols. A conga line formed, led by Santa Claus himself, and paraded rhythmically around the room.

There was laughing, cheering and singing. For one night at least, toymaking was forgotten, while the elves danced and played. A large stack of piping hot pizzas arrived from Polar Pizza, with another stack following an hour later. Anyone looking in the window from outside would think two things: first, that it is extremely cold outside, and second that inside there was too much food, too much drink and too much fun. But for the hard working elves of the North Pole, it was just enough.


“**I**T DONE BEIN’ DEM GILBERT FELLERS!” called Grampa Les. He leapt from the sofa and danced an arrhythmic jig, his skinny legs akimbo. He looked in danger of toppling over and shattering one or both hips, but although he teetered dangerously in all directions, somehow he maintained his balance.

Jody clapped politely as Ambrose and his brothers broke through the yellow tape, the Sullivan Sisters right behind them, kicking and cursing their Segways. They had been even with the Gilberts, each leaning as far forward as they could on their scooters, when each scooter lurched backwards. The sisters stumbled off for a moment, then jumped back on. The three Segways, only feet from the finish line, each inexplicably reversed and the Gilbert Brothers were able to cross the line first.

Ronnie, Donnie and Little Jack also clapped for the Gilbert Brothers, and made enthusiastic dog barking noises when the Sullivan Sisters stepped onto the podium to collect their silver medals and a hug from the genial host.

The doorbell rang and Jody got up to answer it. Stig was standing there, with a sheepish smile on his face. Although it was not all that cold outside, he was shivering.

“What did I miss?” he asked.

 An exhausted Iggy shuffled into the little kitchen in Elves Barracks B, and poured himself a tall mug of poinsettia tea. He needed something to perk him up after the late night celebrations that went on after the end of the Audacious Odyssey. His head ached. He felt like someone was still blowing a trombone.

Yugo was already awake, and was bent over the spreadsheet attached to the front of the refrigerator.

“Looks like a tie. We each got twelve points.” He stepped back and let Iggy look at the chart. He was right of course. When the Gilbert Brothers won the Odyssey and the Sullivan Sisters finished last, Yugo collected the two points he needed to catch Iggy. Sam, of course, remained dead last, with a total of zero points.

Iggy looked at Yugo. “So we’re tied. How does that work then?”

Yugo shrugged. “We split the pot. We each put a hundred bucks in, for a total of 300 bucks. You and I get 150 each.”

Iggy blew on his poinsettia tea to cool it down. “Sam owes us both fifty bucks then.”

“That’s another way of looking at it,” agreed Yugo.

There was a groan from the other side of the room. “Speak of the devil,” said Iggy.

Sam walked slowly into the kitchen. His face was pale and he had large purple circles under each eye. "ooooooh," he moaned.

"You don't look too good," said Iggy.

"I don't feel too good," said Sam. "In fact I feel terrible. I am never, *ever*, drinking rutabaga schnapps again."

Iggy smiled and sipped his tea.

"What's that you got there?" asked Sam.

"Poinsettia tea," answered Iggy.

"Let me try some," said Sam. Iggy passed the mug to Sam who poured its steaming contents down his throat in one long swallow. He passed the empty mug back to Iggy, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and burped loudly. "That's a little better," he said.

Iggy took his mug over to the counter and refilled it. "That was a fun time last night," he said.

"Too fun," groaned Sam.

"Now that the Audacious Odyssey is over," said Yugo. "It's time to settle the bet."

"What bet?" asked Sam, insincerely. He looked over at Iggy and Yugo and blinked a few times. Even his blinks seemed insincere.

"You know very well what bet," said Iggy. "The Bet. It was your idea in the first place."

"The same bet we've been talking about all autumn. The bet on the Audacious Odyssey," said Yugo.

"Oh, that bet," said Sam. "Did I win?"

"Not even close," said Iggy. He passed Sam the chart with all of the scores on it. Sam studied it carefully. He traced one chubby figure along the row of zeros beside his name.

"Iggy and I are tied," said Yugo.

"Oh," said Sam. He passed the chart back to Iggy. Then, after a moment, he added, "so, there was no winner, then."

"Of course there was, Yugo and I both won," said Iggy.

"But there was no *clear* winner," qualified Sam.

"There was a clear loser," said Yugo. He was getting a little annoyed with Sam's prevarications. "And that was you."

"But if nobody won, then there really isn't a bet," said Sam. "It's a push."

“A push?” asked Iggy.

“That’s what you call a bet that ends up tied. A push. And that’s what we seem to have here,” explained Sam.

“The bet is not tied,” said Yugo, raising his voice. “Iggy and I are tied, that’s all. You lost the bet. We won the bet. And now it’s time to pay up.”

“Yeah, pay up,” said Iggy.

Sam sighed. “Fine. What do I owe you?” he asked.

“You owe us a hundred bucks. Fifty each,” said Yugo.

“A hundred bucks!” shouted Sam. “No way.”

“Way,” said Iggy.

“That was your idea, too,” added Yugo.

“A hundred bucks is a lot of money. I never said we were betting bucks. I thought we were betting bolivars,” said Sam.

“Of course not,” Iggy shouted. He was tired, he had a headache and he had no further patience for this discussion. “Why would we bet bolivars? Why would anyone bet bolivars? There’s nothing in the world as worthless as a bolivar.”¹⁵

“You always do this, Sam,” yelled Yugo, his face reddening. “Now quit stalling and pay up.” He took a step towards Sam.

Sam crossed his arms and glared at Yugo. Yugo glared at Sam. Iggy made no move to get between them. The confrontation was sure to come to blows when there was a clatter at the door and a pink envelope, slightly browned around the edges, slipped through the mail slot and tumbled to the floor.

The three elves broke off their argument and stared at the envelope. Iggy picked it up and pulled out the letter inside while Sam opened the door to find hundreds of elves crammed into the hallway, breathlessly waiting to see what was in the envelope.

Iggy read Jody’s invitation to Christmas dinner. The elves in the hallway cheered and sang. Sam pressed his hand against his temple and then

¹⁵ There is one thing more worthless than a bolivar and that is the centimo. There are 100 centimos to the bolivar, making it one hundred times more useless than a bolivar. The copper used to make a centimo is much, much valuable than the coin itself. Indeed, a centimo minted from a single centimo’s worth of copper would be about 11 atoms in diameter and visible with only the most powerful electron microscopes.

slammed the door shut. “Honestly, doesn’t anybody ever make toys around here anymore?” he grumbled.

He turned back to Iggy and Yugo. “Look guys, I know it sounds like a lot of fun, but how can we possibly go for Christmas dinner? Production is way behind. We’ll be working through Christmas this year.”

“We never work through Christmas. We are always done by Christmas. We have to be done by Christmas,” said Iggy. “We’ll get everything finished on time again this year, you’ll see.”

“Besides, Sam, I’ve never known you to turn down a free meal before,” said Yugo with a smile.

Sam cupped his chin in his hand and pondered this. Visions of sugarplums danced in his head. These were succeeded by visions of turkey, mashed potatoes, quarts of gravy and cranberry pie with an enormous scoop of ice cream.

“All right,” he sighed. “I’m in. But there had better be a huge turkey on the menu.”

“GOOSE. IT WILL BE GOOSE,” JODY THOUGHT. She closed her copy of *Christmas Dinner for Dummies*. After weeks of indecision, she had finally settled on Goose Stuffed with Breaded Pineapple Husks and Vinegar Truffles. She looked through her pantry, which was entirely bereft of goose, pineapple, vinegar and truffles.

“I guess that I had better do some shopping,” she said. She slipped Rhonda’s key off the hook and stole into the minivan. The traffic was unbelievable. Everyone was either at the mall, or headed in that direction. Jody finally found a parking spot three quarters of a mile from the grocery store. She had to wait ten minutes for another minivan to leave so she could get it.

The grocery store was as crowded as she had ever seen it. Normally polite and reserved people were fighting over the last few boxes of mandarin oranges and candy canes. Jody headed straight for the goose aisle, where she saw two kindergarten teachers grappling on the ground over a free range turkey. Geese were still plentiful in the big cooler, and Jody wrestled the biggest one she could find into her cart.

She made her way to the pineapple section, and was idly looking at the nearly empty shelves of homemade stuffing mix when her grocery cart collided with that of a hugely muscled man in a tight orange T-shirt.

Jody recognized him at once. It was Mr. Hastings, the advanced pupil she had seen at Kim Chee's Kick-Boxing Studio.

"I'm so sorry," he said. She glanced at her grocery cart and noticed it had actually been dented in the collision.

She looked back up. "Oh, it was all my fault, really," she said.

"You're very kind," Mr. Hastings said. He nodded his head and then made his way down the crowded aisle.

Jody continued on for a few steps, and then turned to follow him. She watched as he put three TV dinners, some vitamins and a jug of milk in his cart. He passed the magazine rack and slowed down. He stopped at the end of the display, where there was a rotating wire rack with a few comic books on it. He turned the rack slowly, looking over all of the titles and then carried on down the aisle, shaking his head. Jody pulled up to the comic rack and looked at the books on the shelf. It was the usual assortment of mighty heroes and heavily endowed heroines. Even the new Planet Master was there.

"No Captain Justice, though," Jody whispered. She looked back up, but Mr. Hastings had disappeared into the mob.

She steered her purchases to the shortest check-out line which, as always, turned out to be the slowest one as well. The sun was starting to set by the time she finally reached the van. She was tired and her feet hurt, but she had one more stop to make. She still had to get something for Stig for Christmas.

She wound through the traffic jam in the mall parking lot. Horns honked and fists were waved, but eventually she made her way to the main road, which was itself much like the parking lot, except that the traffic was moving more slowly.

Forty-five minutes later she double parked in front of the *Laughing Ninja* and ran inside. The welcome mat made the familiar ray gun noises as she burst through the door. Then she stopped cold. The mat kept firing sonic laser beams, but she could not move.

Her nephew Ronnie was standing right in front of her. He was wearing a *Laughing Ninja* T-Shirt and sweeping the floor.

"Hey, Aunt Jody," he said with a smile. A button on his T-shirt had a decal of some super being and beside it was his name, 'Ronald'.

Jody tried to smile in return, but her face was frozen in surprise. Finally she blurted out, "Ronnie?"

"What brings you here?" asked Ronnie. Then he raised a finger and tapped the side of his head. "Oh, I bet I know. You need a Christmas

present for Stig. Come on, we have just the thing.” He leaned his broom against the wall and motioned for her to follow him down the aisle.

“Ronnie?” Jody said again weakly. She followed him in a daze. They reached the back of the store where Alert, Rudy, Herschel and Lance were engaged in their usual Saturday night game. Ronnie disappeared into a back room.

The card table was arrayed with the usual assortment of papers, reference texts and snack food. Herschel rolled three multi-sided die and chanted “Gliggb-nbjuk adu barknaaal!” He sat down and pulled his hood over his head.

Rudy rolled some dice of his own behind his screen. “The kobolds have metamorphosed into harmless barn owls,” he said. “You collect 30 experience points.”

Lance and Herschel clapped happily. Lance refilled a horn shaped plastic mug with orange soda. Alert Darr looked up and waved at Jody. “Hey, Jody,” he said. “Have you finally decided to join us?”

Jody just stared straight ahead and whispered, “Ronnie?”

Alert nodded and said, “I see you’ve met Ronald, my new employee. That kid is great.”

Ronnie came back with a long box containing a two foot tall statue of a muscular man in a sleek white uniform. “It’s a Planet Master statue,” he said, passing it to Jody. “It’s made from cold cast porcelain and it’s hand painted. It’s a limited edition, too, only 500 in existence. He turned the box over to show the base of the statue, which had the figures “213/500” etched in a delicate hand. “Stig will love it. Guaranteed.”

Alert smiled. “What did I tell you? This kid is just terrific. Hard worker, great attitude.”

“What do you say?” asked Ronnie. Jody just nodded numbly.

“Can I get you anything else?” Ronnie asked solicitously.

Alert picked an object off of the cluttered shelf beside him. “Here, slip this one under the tree, too. Stig will get a kick out of it.”

Ronnie took the two items, and wrapped each one carefully in tissue paper. “Hey Mr. Darr, did you see the Audacious Odyssey last night?” he asked.

Alert shook his head. “I’m afraid not. I don’t watch much television,” he said.

“You missed quite a show,” said Lance.

“Thuirf ygmurr insh-fha jyi” added Herschel.

Ronnie tucked Jody's purchases into a yellow *Laughing Ninja* bag and rang them up. Jody numbly handed him her credit card. Then she collected the bag and walked out of the store.

She stood on the sidewalk for a full minute before she said, "Ronnie?"

SHE WAS STILL IN A DAZE WHEN SHE GOT HOME. She was struggling to get her heavy bags through the door, when suddenly a pair of strong arms lifted them from her.

"Hey Aunt Jody," said Donnie. He took her bags into the kitchen and set them on the table.

"Donnie?" asked Jody.

Donnie slipped the goose into the fridge and quickly put the rest of the groceries away. He made a little bow and then jogged up the stairs.

Jody blinked and shook her head. She unpacked the bag from the *Laughing Ninja*, carefully unwrapping the Planet Master statue. She did not pretend to understand anything about the Planet Master, but she was sure that Stig would love it. She started to fold the bag, then noticed the other toy that Alert had slipped inside. She pulled it out of the bag and unwrapped it.

She turned it in her hand for a moment. It was a small action figure of Captain Justice.

CHRISTMAS EVE. The busiest day of the year at the North Pole. Iggy, Yugo and Sam were up early that morning. This was because they had been up the entire night before, finishing the late shift, before they immediately started the early shift.

Iggy's eyes were glazed and his fingers were numb. He screwed wooden wheels onto wooden axles mechanically, then passed them onto Yugo, who fitted the assembly onto little wooden cars and then onto Sam, who sprayed them with yellow and red paint before passing them onto the next elf in line.

"Did you RSVP to Jody yet?" Iggy asked vacantly.

Yugo clipped another car together and handed it to Sam. "I sent her an e-mail this morning," he said.

“Did you remember to ask for pie?” asked Sam.

“That’s a little rude, don’t you think?” asked Iggy.

“What would Christmas dinner be without pie?” replied Sam.

“I’m sorry, Sam, but I did not make a point of asking for pie.”

“Could you?” asked Sam.

“Consider it done,” said Yugo.

“Thanks,” said Sam, and he went back to spraying paint.

CHRISTMAS EVE. Jody slept late. When she finally opened her eyes to check the time, she saw a green-bordered card on the nightstand, leaning up against her clock radio. She sat up quickly and looked around the room. Her door was closed. There was nobody else there.

She reached over and picked up the card. It was an e-mail from the North Pole: an elf-mail.

She flipped over the card. It read:

Dearest Jody,

Thank you for your kind note. Please forgive our delay in replying.

We would not miss Christmas dinner with you and Stig for anything. We will be heading your way as soon as we finish up here on Christmas Eve.

Expect us around lunchtime.

Your pals,

Iggy, Yugo and Sam

Then, as she was reading, another line of type scrolled across the bottom of the card:

PS: I hope that there will be pie.

-- Sam

Jody smiled. Iggy, Yugo and Sam were coming for Christmas dinner after all. Now she knew for a certainty that nothing could possibly go wrong.

She also knew that she was going to have to make some pie.

JODY ARRIVED AT STIG'S HOUSE EARLY on Christmas morning, with a large goose under one arm and three pineapples and a gallon of white wine vinegar in the other.

"This would be a lot easier if we did not live so far apart, she said, when Stig greeted her at the door. He helped her bring her dinner supplies into the kitchen.

"What are you talking about, you live right next door," said Stig. "We can't live any closer together than that."

Jody glared at Stig, but he just looked back blankly. "What?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Jody.

"I think it's something," said Stig.

"No," said Jody.

"Fine then," said Stig.

"Good then," said Jody.

"Fine," said Stig.

"Good," said Jody. Then flipped the goose onto the counter and pulled apart its legs. "Now get stuffing."

"Fine," said Stig, and together they set about preparing the exotic breaded pineapple husk stuffing Jody had read about in *Christmas Dinner For Dummies*. It involved, first, husking a pineapple, and then, second, breading it. This was not as easy to do as it sounds. The ingredients involved went far beyond bread and pineapples. The recipe required almost all of the spices, except allspice. It included basil and rosemary, even though neither Basil nor Rosemary were included in the

dinner invitations. They were wise to add sage, and ginger only gingerly. They were both cool to chili, but agreed that some anise would be nice. And thyme, there never seemed to be enough of that.

“Good,” said Jody, as Stig gently tossed the pineapple husks in the bread crumbs. She set to soaking the truffles in vinegar. This was exactly as easy as it sounded, and involved dumping a bag of farm fresh truffles into a large bowl of warm washed vinegar and letting them soak a while.

“Fine,” said Stig, and while he waited for that to finish, he started peeling potatoes.

“Good,” said Jody, who was rolling out a pie crust.

“Fine,” said Stig. He pulled out a big black pot and poured flour, sugar and a whole box of Missus Klaus’ Christmas Pudding Mix[®] into it.

“Good,” said Jody. She spread a bag of nuts on the counter and pulled open a drawer. There, sitting on the top of a tangled mess of spoons, ladles and flippers was an old wooden Little Stubby Fish Whacker[™]. She lifted it out of the drawer and looked at it with a bemused expression on her face.

The room grew quiet for a moment, so Stig said, “Fine,” just to make some noise.

Jody turned and looked at him with a smile on her face. “Good,” she said, and slammed the fish whacker onto the counter, shattering the nuts into little pieces.

The conversation carried on in this fashion, with ‘goods’ and ‘fines’ alternating for the next two hours. In that time, they mashed some potatoes, steamed some vegetables, cooked a pudding, crushed some nuts, rolled up a cheese ball, mixed up a punch, laid out a vegetable plate, heated a roux, put a pie in the oven and boiled some hot dogs for lunch.

“By the way,” said Jody. “Merry Christmas.” She stood on her toes and kissed Stig on the cheek.

Stig blinked. His arm was elbow deep inside the goose. Jody passed him another fistful of spicy breaded pineapple husk and soaking truffles and he stuffed them in.

“Sure,” he said. “Merry Christmas.”

“I have something for you,” said Jody with a smile.

Stig pulled his arm out of the goose and smiled back. “Giveittomenow,” he said.

“Oh!” said Jody. “You didn’t say please.”

“Please give it to me now,” replied Stig quickly.

“All right,” laughed Jody. She ran back to the kitchen, where all of her bags lay in a heap. She ruffled through them and pulled out a large box wrapped in pink and silver paper. There was a satin ribbon around it with a bow made with red and gold ribbon. Jody had woven little silver ribbons and a bell into the bow. It had taken her hours to wrap it this way.

She presented the package to Stig. He tore the paper, ribbon and bow off in just under two seconds.

“Do you like it?” asked Jody.

“I more than like it,” Stig replied. He was in awe. He lifted the box containing the gleaming porcelain statue and stared at it for several minutes. Then he walked across the room and very gently placed it on a shelf.

“Aren’t you going to take it out of the box?” asked Jody.

“Oh no, I can’t do that,” answered Stig. “It’s a collectible.”

“But you can’t even see it inside the box!”

“The box is what makes it a collectible,” explained Stig.

“Maybe I should have just bought you the box then,” said Jody.

Stig gave his usual blank stare in response. Every day he was convinced more and more that he would never understand women, and more particularly, he would never understand Jody. Perhaps that was what made her so interesting. Perhaps even more interesting was that Jody was thinking exactly the same thing at exactly the same moment.

The moment was interrupted by a low humming noise that seemed to come from the backyard. It grew louder, until it felt like it was passing right over them. They both looked up and saw Stig’s familiar white stippled ceiling. The noise passed towards the front of the house and then, stopped with a clatter.

In a flash, Stig and Jody ran to the front window, tore open the shutters and threw up the sash. The new-fallen snow was lustrous in the midday sun. And there, in the middle of the front lawn, before their wondering eyes appeared a miniature snowmobile, still steaming from its long Christmas journey.

This snowmobile was not like anything one would find in a sporting goods catalogue. None of those snowmobiles can float on water, fly or travel through time. And none of those snowmobiles are driven by elves from the North Pole.

This snowmobile had big black wheels at the back and burnished steel skis in the front. Above the skis was a fully enclosed cabin from which Stig and Jody could hear the beat of heavy bass drums. It sounded like a hip hop arrangement of *Silent Night*. Small wings protruded from either side of the snowmobile, with little flashing red lights at the tips. The lights stopped flashing, the drums stopped pounding and the low hum of the engine faded to silence.

Doors on either side of the snowmobile rose up on noiseless hydraulics. A little driver, lively and quick, stepped out onto the snow. They knew in a moment it must be ...

“Yugo!” shouted Stig.

“Iggy!” shouted Jody, as he stepped out of the passenger side of the snowmobile. They ran out to greet the elves while Sam squeezed his way out. He did not look well and held a small paper bag in his hand.

“Here, take care of this,” said Sam, passing the bag to Stig when he arrived. It was warm. Stig looked inside the bag and made a face.

“I have a delicate digestion,” said Sam. “And it was a bumpy flight.”

Stig made another face. “I can see that. Smell it, too,” he added. He held the bag at arm’s length and carried it to a trash can beside the house.

“Merry Christmas,” said Iggy. He hugged Jody around the waist, which was about as high as he could reach. She bent over to hug him back. Jody made her way around, hugging each elf in turn. Her arms barely reached around Sam’s back.

“Did you have a good trip?” asked Stig, walking back from the trash can and wiping his hands on his jeans.

“For the most part,” said Yugo. “We ran into some rough air coming over the Yukon,”

“Really rough,” said Sam weakly.

“But other than that, it was clear sailing,” finished Yugo.

Iggy held out a green bottle with a red bow on it. “We brought you this. It’s real elfwine. Made from grapes grown at the North Pole.”

Jody took the bottle and looked at it with a curious expression. “I didn’t think anything could grow at the North Pole,” she said quizzically.

Yugo nodded. “The growing season is pretty short. Only a few hours every year, so the grapes are pretty small. But you’ve never tasted anything like it.”

“Be careful, though,” said Sam, tapping the bottle. “This stuff has a kick like a Clydesdale.”

“It’s really nice you could come,” said Stig, slapping Sam on the back. The rotund elf stumbled for a moment and then caught his step. “We’ve been in the kitchen all day, cooking like crazy.”

Sam’s eyes brightened up. “You don’t say?”

“You won’t believe how much food we have,” said Jody.

Sam’s eyes brightened up even more. A trace of drool appeared at the corner of his mouth. “Do you have pie?” he asked.

“We sure do,” laughed Jody. She took his chubby hand in hers and led him into the house. Iggy, Yugo and Stig followed. As they reached the doorway, Yugo reached back and pointed a small black object at the snowmobile. The horn honked and the doors locked with a gentle click. Yugo stuffed his keys into his jacket pocket and went inside.

The door had just closed when a suspicious looking man in a dark hooded jacket lifted his head over the hedge and stared at the snowmobile greedily. He pulled a cell phone from the pocket at the front of his jacket and pressed a few keys. He whispered into the phone for a few moments and then snapped it shut. He looked back at the snowmobile and rubbed his hands together.

“**W**E DIDN’T KNOW IF WE WERE GOING to make it,” said Iggy. He picked a carrot from the vegetable tray and dipped it in dressing. They were sitting in Stig’s living room, which was decorated with every bit of Christmas bric-a-brac that Jody could find. There were paper machier reindeer on the shelves, pine boughs draped on the walls and piles of artificial snow lay in the corners. Glow in the dark snowflakes were pasted on the windows. Christmas music played softly in the background.

“I’ve never seen it so busy at the North Pole,” said Yugo. He selected a sprig of broccoli and set it on his plate. “We were still making toys right up to the last minute. Santa was late leaving, but somehow he got it all done again.”

“All in one night,” added Iggy.

“At least we get a few days off now,” said Yugo.

“But Christmas is not for another year?” said Jody.

“I know,” said Yugo. “But we’ll be starting on next year’s presents right before New Years.”

Sam nodded and scooped another spoonful of pie into his mouth. Although he was the third smallest person in the room, Sam had secured the biggest chair and settled into it quickly. He chewed his pie once and then swallowed it, pausing only long enough to turn up the volume on the football game with the remote control before taking another large mouthful of pie.

They were all seated in the living room, enjoying each other’s company. Enjoying Christmas. Jody wore a green dress with a pattern of holly leaves underneath an apron with a red nosed reindeer on it. She walked around the room with two large trays of food in her hands. Stig took a bite from a piece of fruitcake. “This is terrific,” he said to Jody. “What kind of fruits are these?”

“Cherries, I think,” she answered.

Sam cracked open a tin of beer and slurped it down noisily.

“I thought you had a delicate digestion,” said Yugo playfully.

“I do,” replied Sam. “So you better not upset me. You don’t want to see what happens if my digestion gets upset.”

The doorbell rang. Jody set down her trays and answered it. On the other side of the door stood a severe looking woman in a sensible lavender business suit with the shoulder pads of a middle linebacker. She glared at Jody. It was Stig’s mother, Mrs. Hawkins. Mrs. Hawkins was a woman of sharp features; every part of her seemed to have an edge. She had a sharp nose, a sharp chin and sharp piercing eyes. Her hair was a pointed pile of purple curls.

Jody froze under her gaze.

A cold breeze blew through the living room. “Hey, shut that door, will you? It’s freezing in here!” shouted Sam. Then he burped. He set his empty tin on the coffee table and grabbed another one.

“M-Merry Christmas, Mrs. Hawkins,” Jody was finally able to blurt out.

“Here,” said Mrs. Hawkins, pushing her coat, an umbrella and a Tupperware container filled with Jell-O into Jody’s arms.

“Oh Mrs. Hawkins, you didn’t have to bring anything,” began Jody. Mrs. Hawkins pushed past Jody without saying anything more and marched purposefully into the house.

“Where’s my son?” she asked.

“Right here, Mother,” said Stig, leaping to attention. Mrs Hawkins approached him and leaned forward. Stig dutifully kissed her on her cheek. For a moment, his lips froze there, as though he were kissing a lamp post in winter. He pulled his lips free and his head snapped back.

Mrs. Hawkins stepped into the living room. She looked over the end of the room distastefully. “Stig, your living room is filled with ... trolls,” she said, coldly.

Stig stammered, “Mother, they aren’t trolls. They’re elves.”

Mrs. Hawkins sniffed.

“And they’re our friends. Let me introduce you. This is Iggy, Yugo and Sam.” The three elves stood up and bowed.

“We’re very pleased to meet you,” said Iggy.

Mrs. Hawkins just looked down at Iggy with her cold sharp gaze. Iggy shivered slightly. Having lived at the North Pole for a few hundred years, Iggy hardly ever felt the cold. But he felt a chill, now. He wondered if he would ever feel warm again.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Hawkins. Then she turned to Stig and said, “be a dear and collect Fredda, will you?”

“Fredda?” asked Stig, turning a little pale. Fredda was Mrs. Hawkins’ pet Airedale. “You didn’t bring Fredda, did you?”

“Of course I did. It’s Christmas.”

Stig hung his head and walked out to his mother’s car. Jody was still standing in the doorway, frozen with Mrs. Hawkins’ Jell-O in her hands.

“Hey,” said Stig as he walked past her.

“Hey,” she replied, still frozen.

Fredda was quite possibly the fattest and laziest dog yet born. Nonetheless, Mrs. Hawkins was completely devoted to her. Fredda made Mrs. Hawkins feel strange new things she had never felt before. These new feelings could even be called a primitive form of love. However, ‘love’ is too large a word for such a new and incompletely formed emotion. This incomplete feeling is best described with a word, which is itself incomplete, like ‘lov’. Mrs. Hawkins was in lov with Fredda.

Few people have ever felt love for an animal, like the lov Mrs. Hawkins felt for Fredda. Fredda had her own private bedroom. Each evening, Mrs. Hawkins cooked Fredda a fresh steak with imported steak sauce and served it on a plate beside a silver vase with a fresh flower in it. She knitted sweaters and socks for Fredda and had portraits taken of her by overpriced photographers. She hired professional dog walkers to walk

Fredda every day, however, because of Fredda's remarkable girth, she was walked in a custom built and specially reinforced stroller.

Stig reached Mrs. Hawkins' Volvo and opened the rear hatch. Fredda poured out of it and onto the driveway. Stig reached down to pick up the big dog, but it was like trying to gather up wet cement. She was heavy and kept oozing out of his arms. After several frustrating attempts to pick up Fredda, Stig formed her into a sort of a ball and rolled her up to the front steps. But the ball lost its shape when he tried to push it up the steps and he had to pull her into the house by her leash.

He was sweating heavily as he worked Fredda past the not yet thawed Jody. "Hey," he grunted as he pulled Fredda by.

"Hey," replied Jody.

He rolled Fredda into the living room, where Mrs. Hawkins stood by the fireplace with a large scotch in her hand and an unpleasant grimace on her face. As soon as she saw Fredda, her face brightened up.

"There's Mommy's good girl. Aren't you a good girl?" cooed Mrs Hawkins at the large furry lump at her feet. Fredda looked up, blinked her wet brown eyes twice and farted.

"What a good girl!" said Mrs Hawkins. She passed her empty tumbler to Stig. Stig took the glass and then turned his head away from the smell.

"Be a dear and fill that for your mother," said Mrs. Hawkins, all the while making doe eyes at Fredda.

Stig did as he was told and marched into the kitchen to refill his Mother's glass. As he dropped some ice cubes in the glass, he saw Jody was still standing in the doorway, shivering.

"Jody," he hissed. "I need your help. Get in here."

Jody turned slowly and looked at Stig. Her face was pale. "It's so cold," she whispered. Stig set the glass on the counter and jogged to the door to help her back inside.

"Hey, where'zit yer getting' at?" said a raspy voice behind them. Stig turned and saw Grampa Les standing at the door. He was wearing a red plaid sport coat with a large yellow flower pinned to the lapel. In one hand he gripped his cane, the other gripped a large bottle of scotch. Stig reached down and took the bottle from Grampa Les, though not without a bit of a struggle.

"Thanks Grampa Les," he said. "You're a life saver."

Jody shook herself out of her daze, took Grampa Les' arm and helped him hobble into the living room. Grampa Les leaned into Jody's ear and whispered loudly, "Izzat Missus Hawkins here?"

Jody wiped the beads of spit from her ear and whispered back, "I'm afraid so, Grampa Les."

He straightened his narrow blue checked tie. "Whadder yer be thinkin' of my blazer?" Grampa Les asked Jody. "I bin wearin' this vurry same blazer ever Crimmas since niney fifty five. Or mebbe it was niney forty five."

"It looks very smart," said Jody. Grampa Les smiled and stood up as straight as his bowed legs and bowed spine would let him. He entered the living room and bowed deeply. "Good evernin' and Murray Crimmas," he said.

Mrs. Hawkins raised her refilled tumbler and replied, "Merry Christmas, Lester." Grampa Les slowly stood up again, his face beaming with a wide yellow grin.

Yugo walked over to Grampa Les and extended his little hand. "Merry Christmas, Grampa Les," he said.

The old man took Yugo's hand and pumped it up and down. "Why if it ain't the critter wit the fancy auto-snow-bile," he said. "How izzat you and yer kinfolk be keepin' yer own sells?" Iggy and Sam both waved at Grampa Les and exchanged Christmas greetings.

Then Grampa Les held his long bony hand out and said, "Wazza old man gotta be getting' at to be getting' a drink 'round 'bout herein?"

Stig quickly pressed a full tumbler of scotch into Grampa Les' spidery fingers. He raised his glass and then took a long pull from it, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down with each prodigious swallow.

He raised his nearly empty glass and said, "Thass a finer boy what you got there, Missus Hawkins."

Mrs. Hawkins replied, "he is fine enough, one supposes. Of course, he never wanted for anything. He attended the finest schools and the finest summer camps."

Stig raised an eyebrow. "I never went to summer camp, mother."

Mrs. Hawkins glared at him icily. "Of course you did. You went to that camp on the old lake. Camp Kaninnee."

Stig shook his head. "It's not Camp Kaninnee, it's Camp Canine. And Fredda went there, not me. You sent the dog to camp."

Mrs. Hawkins puckered her mouth and continued, "and I took him to Europe, to see the great capitals of the world."

"That was the dog, too," said Stig.

"And Disneyland, of course. Every child should see Disneyland."

“Dog again.”

Grampa Les shuffled over and tapped his tumbler against hers. “Don’t you be giving that boy none o’ yer no nevermind. These kids these days, they ain’t got none o’ yer respect and none o’ yer proper grateful for the sacrifices what their elders done made for ‘em.”

Mrs. Hawkins shook her head severely. “You are so right, Lester. You are so right.”

“Oh yes I so am, I so am,” said Grampa Les. They both tipped their tumblers back and drained them.

The doorbell rang again, and this time Stig hurried to answer it. Rudy was there, bearing a platter with a cheese plate to add to the feast. He greeted the other guests politely, then sat down and had a long and engaging discussion with Iggy and Sam about the world of elves. He was particularly interested in understanding their modes of attack and defence. Iggy just shrugged and explained that they really was not much call for repelling ambushes in the toy factory. Rudy did his best to hide his disappointment.

And so it went, there was good conversation, laughter, glasses clinking and a very large dog occasionally farting.

Jody was running from the kitchen to the living room, filling plates and glasses, when Iggy, Yugo and Sam caught up with her. “So, what’s up?” asked Iggy. “In your letter, you said you needed our help. You said you were worried about Stig.”

“He looks fine to me,” said Yugo.

Jody pulled them aside and whispered quickly. “He’s been acting weird for months now. I hardly ever see him. And when I do, there’s always something wrong with him. He’s always bruised or limping.”

She walked over to a stack of newspapers by the back door. She dug through them and pulled out a copy of the Times-Enquirer. On the front page there was a colour picture of a grateful looking elderly woman holding a cat, which was obviously struggling to get out of her arms. The caption under the photograph read “**Amazing Man Gets The Pussy!**”

Iggy looked at the article. “So?” he said.

Jody lowered her voice. “I think that might be Stig.”

Sam looked at the picture in the newspaper again. “This old lady?” he asked.

“No, not the old lady. Amazing Man. I think Stig is Amazing Man.”

“Stig is a good guy,” said Sam. “But I wouldn’t go so far as to call him amazing.”

“I don’t think he’s amazing. Well, I do, a little bit, maybe,” said Jody, getting flustered. “But that’s not what I mean. What I mean is that I think Stig is dressing up as a super hero and getting into fights with dangerous criminals. He goes out by himself all the time. I’m worried he’s going to get killed.”

Iggy, Yugo and Sam broke up in laughter. “Stig?” asked Iggy.

“A super hero?” asked Yugo.

Sam was laughing too hard to say anything. He finally pulled up a chair while he struggled to catch his breath.

“I’m serious,” said Jody. “I need your help.”

“Sure, we’d be happy to help,” said Iggy.

“I could make him a whole bunch of great super hero gadgets,” said Yugo. “Grappling guns, laser pens, that sort of thing.”

“Not that kind of help,” said Jody. “I just want him to stay home, with me. Before he gets hurt. Or worse.”

“Are you sure?” asked Iggy. “Stig doesn’t really seem like the super hero type.” But then he remembered how the year before Stig had put on a homemade suit of armour and marched into a cave to rescue Jody from a dragon. Maybe there was something to Jody’s fears, after all.

“But what can we do?” asked Yugo.

“I don’t know,” sighed Jody. “Maybe you could just talk to him. See what he’s up to. I never seem to be able to get a straight answer out of him these days.”

“We’ll try,” said Iggy.

“Thanks guys.” Jody reached down and took all three into her arms. For the first time in weeks, the ache in her stomach had gone away.



IF ONLY JODY’S STOMACH KNEW what was happening on the front lawn, it would be aching like it had a peptic ulcer. But Jody’s stomach did not know this; and how could it? It is just a stomach after all. But it did not know what was happening on the front lawn and for that, it would have been grateful; if that is something that stomachs can be.

The thing that was happening on the front lawn, and the thing of which Jody's stomach was blissfully unaware, was this: Four men, each dressed in black hooded sweatshirts had gathered behind Stig's front hedge.

They had watched of the guests arrive. They saw the glow and heard the laughter from inside this Christmas home, but they did not care about that. They had their eyes on a different prize, a gleaming red prize, lying alone and unattended in the middle of the lawn.

The biggest hood looked at his watch. It was almost the dinner hour. Soon, everyone inside, the tall and the small, would sit down to a feast. Then they'd feast and they'd feast and they'd feast, feast, feast, feast. They would not notice anything happening outside. Not in the least. It was time to move. He signalled to his associates.

The four hoods pulled up the hoods on their jackets and scampered across the lawn. They sidled up to the snowmobile and inspected it closely. A blue light on the dashboard flashed periodically, signalling the presence of an alarm system. They would have to be careful.

There was no place to insert a key anywhere, nor was there any keypad which might accept a code. There was a thumb pad beside the recessed door handle on the driver's side, but it was far too small for any of the hoods to operate. The smallest of the hooded hoods pulled a stolen credit card from the pocket at the front of his jacket. He tried to carefully slide it into the space between the door and the body of the snowmobile in order to jimmy the lock, but the vehicle was so precisely crafted that that the card would not fit.

The thinnest of the hooded hoods slid underneath the snowmobile, to see if he could force it open from there. He looked at the engine from below. It was meticulously clean, with no trace of grease or oil anywhere. Thousands of cables and wires snaked their way in and around the engine parts, most of which were completely different than anything the thin hood had seen before. He traced a long finger along them, looking for some way to access the electrical system, but he quickly became confused. The wires seemed to lead back to each other and try as he might, he could not find their source.

The biggest hooded hood approached the snowmobile from the rear. If he could somehow remove the back window, they would be able to get inside. He looked through the window, but all he saw was his own dark hooded face. The window was mirrored and he could not see inside. He tapped it gently, and it made a soft pinging sound. He studied the window's edge, and saw that it was secured by hundreds of tiny rivets. It would be impossible to remove it without special tools, and while he had all of the tools any burglar could dream of in his bag, he had nothing



nearly small enough to do this kind of work. He was going to need something bigger. He dug through his black bag and pulled out a heavy hammer. He swung it twice, to get a feel for its weight, then brought it down hard on the window. It bounced back, vibrating in his hand. The window did not break, and made only a soft pinging sound.

The smartest hooded hood stood at the front of the snowmobile, watching his colleagues with increasing frustration. They had broken into cars and houses and banks, but they had never seen anything like this. No matter what they tried, the snowmobile resisted entry. He felt like it was mocking him, laughing to itself in some mechanical way.

In a way, it was. The alarm system was the last line of defence and would only engage if the hoods actually succeeded in getting inside. In the meantime, the snowmobile silently recorded everything they did on its little black box. As they worked beside, behind and beneath the snowmobile, their fingerprints and photographs were being recorded and analyzed by the snowmobile's computers.

"This isn't working," growled the smartest hood.

The skinny one slid out from underneath the snowmobile. "Do you want to give it up?"

"There's plenty of other things to steal," said the smallest hood.

"It is Christmas after all," said the biggest hooded hood.

"No, I don't want to give it up," said the smartest hood. "It might be Christmas, but we'll never find anything else like this. I'm telling you, I saw it arrive. It flew here. With this thing, there is nothing we couldn't do. There's nothing we couldn't steal."

"Then what are we going to do?" asked the biggest hood.

The smart one put his hand into his front jacket pocket and then pulled it out again. His fingers were clutched around a set of shiny brass knuckles. "We'll get it. We just need to get a little more *proactive*."

The other hoods smiled at each other. They liked it when things got proactive.



TIG REACHED INTO THE OVEN AND PULLED out the goose. It was golden brown and the smell of pineapple and truffles filled the house. He carried it to the table, which was decorated in red and green and Jody called their guests for dinner.

Each scene was assigned, with booster seats on the three chairs designated for Iggy, Yugo and Sam. Beside each plate was an array of stemware, cutlery and a Christmas cracker. The elves looked at the crackers curiously, and then following Stig and Jody's example, pulled them apart happily. Soon everyone was wearing coloured tissue paper crowns, except for Mrs. Hawkins, who could not abide that sort of thing.

Sam pointed at Yugo and laughed. "You look ridiculous," he said.

"You're one to talk," replied Yugo. Sam looked ridiculous, too. But, Christmas is like that. It surrounds itself with all sorts of ridiculous little traditions, like paper hats and silly stories.

Iggy sifted through the contents of his cracker. Aside from a purple tissue paper hat, there was a tiny Rubik's Cube and a slip of paper. Iggy picked up the paper and read it aloud:

"What did Adam say on the day before Christmas?"

"I don't know," answered Yugo. "What did Adam say on the day before Christmas?"

"It's Christmas, Eve," said Iggy. He turned the paper over to see if there was something more to the joke.

"That's the lamest joke I've ever heard," said Sam.

"It really is terrible, isn't it," said Iggy. "What does yours say, Yugo?"

"What do elves learn in school?" asked Yugo, reading from his card.

"Same thing as everyone else," said Sam. "Reading, writing, toymaking."

"No," said Yugo. "The answer is 'the elf-abet.'"

"That joke is even worse!" said Sam. "And it's not even true." He grew a little red in the face. Mrs. Hawkins chuckled slightly.

Sam picked up the slip of paper from his cracker. "What do you call people who are afraid of Santa Claus?" he read.

Iggy and Yugo shrugged.

"Claus-trophobic," read Sam. "Oh come on, that is just awful. Who comes up with this stuff?"¹⁶ Mrs. Hawkins snickered a little louder. For a moment, Stig wondered whether she would smile and just what that might look like.

That was when things got *proactive*.

¹⁶ The Christmas cracker was invented in 1847 by an English candy maker named Tom Smith. The jokes have never been any good.



The doorbell rang. Stig got up to get it. "That must be Al," he said. "That guy is always late." He got to the door and reached for the knob, when it suddenly flew open, tearing from its hinges and knocking Stig to the floor. Four men dressed in black hooded jackets strolled inside.

"Holy muskrat mother o' pearl!" cursed Grampa Les.

Stig rose to his knees, but the biggest of the hooded hoods pushed him back on to the ground.

"Nobody move," he growled. He spun a crowbar in his hand like a cheerleader's baton. Then he swung it at a curio shelf near the door. The shelf, a vase, and two ceramic frogs flew through the air and shattered on the ground.

The second hood walked into the front hallway and kicked Stig to the floor again. "We don't want to hurt anybody. Much."

"But we will, if we have to," said the third. He slapped at Stig with the back of his fist, sending Stig rolling down the hall.

"We just want the keys," said the last hooded hood. "So hand them over."

Stig staggered to his feet, wiped a stream of blood from his face and then turned and ran to the basement stairs.

"Stig!" screamed Jody. But he was gone.

Mrs. Hawkins shook her head and rose up from her chair, every one of her sharp edges gleaming. "That will be quite enough of that," she said imperiously. "Fredda," she barked at the heap of fur pancaked in the corner. "Kill them."

Somewhere inside Fredda's mind a feral rage fanned to life and she dreamed of wrapping her teeth around these intruders and tearing their throats out. She revelled in the smell of hot blood splashing on her cheeks and the taste of warm meat, freshly killed. But as much as Fredda's animal spirit was willing, her flesh, all 230 pounds of it, was far too weak. She simply lifted her flabby head and meekly barked, "woof."

The hooded hoods laughed and the biggest one said, "the keys. Hand them over. Now."

Yugo jumped down from his booster seat, straightened his paper crown and defiantly said, "No!"

Sam jumped down from his booster seat, put his chubby hand into Yugo's pocket, pulled out the keys and said, "here." He dangled them out for the hooded hoods.

"Sam!" shouted Iggy and Yugo together.

“What?” asked Sam. Yugo snatched the keys from his hand.

The biggest hooded hood strode in towards Yugo. He raised his crowbar and said, “give them here, little man.”

That was when things got *really* proactive.

The picture window in Stig’s dining room exploded inwards with an enormous crash. Jody and her dinner guests fled from the flying glass. The table flipped over, spattering goose, pineapples, truffles and elfwine on the far wall.

A man rose from the middle of the wreckage. A man dressed in orange spandex and a red cape. He stood up and faced the hooded hoods. “Stand down, villains,” he commanded. “Stand down or face the terrible fury of Captain Justice.”

Iggy looked at Yugo. “Captain Justice? I thought it was Amazing Man?”

“How many superheroes are there in this town?” replied Yugo.

“Not enough,” said Sam. “We could use a few more.”

The hooded hoods were laughing. The biggest one said, “you don’t really want to mess with us again, do you?”

Amazing Man just stared at them and nodded. “Oh yes I do,” he put his hands together and cracked his knuckles. “I very much do,” he said and then he leapt at them. It was a perfectly executed flying hook kick, one that could have knocked out a bull. If Master Kim Chee had seen it, he would have given it top marks.

Unfortunately, Amazing Man flew through the group of hooded hoods, knocking them aside like bowling pins. His foot broke through far the wall, making a large hole. Before he could pull it free, the biggest hooded hood grabbed him by the waist while the others threw punches.

“We have to do something,” said Iggy. “They’ll kill him if we don’t.”

“You’re right,” said Yugo.

“Come on guys, we don’t have to do this,” begged Sam. “Jody just asked us to *talk* to him.”

Iggy and Yugo had already jumped into the fray. Sam sighed and then leapt in himself. The hooded hoods were surprised to be attacked so viciously, and only around their hips and thighs. The tall one pushed Iggy away while the smallest one shoved Yugo aside. Sam proved to be much harder to move, and the other two hoods had to pull on him together to get him out of their way.

Amazing Man freed himself from the wall and renewed his attack. He threw an elbow at the closest hood, then did a backflip over another

before throwing a punch at the third. He reached down and picked up the platter with the pineapple and truffle stuffed goose on it. He dumped the goose onto the carpet and threw the platter, like a Frisbee™, at the fourth hooded hood.

The hood dropped to the floor. The platter flew over him and stuck into the wall. Amazing Man twirled and drove his elbow into the midsection of the nearest hooded hood. But then his left Wellington slipped in a puddle of vinegar soaked truffles and he fell to the ground.

Two hooded hoods were on him at once. Iggy saw a flash of brass knuckles and rushed to Amazing Man's aid. He pulled a drumstick from the goose and swung it like a bat at the closest hood. It had absolutely no effect beyond leaving a drumstick shaped grease stain on the back of the black hood. Amazing Man rolled onto his stomach and then pushed himself up to his knees. The two hoods on his back fell onto either side of him. He stood up and took a couple of steps backwards. He pulled a coil of thin cable from his belt and flung it at the hoods. The hook on the end of the cable caught on the china cabinet at the end of Stig's dining room. Amazing Man pulled and the cabinet, together with all of the dishes inside it, fell to the floor with a resounding crash.

Had any of the hoods been beneath it when it fell, it may well have crippled them. As it was, nearly one hundred pieces of china, including old Grandmother Hawkins' teapot, gave up their decorative existence for nothing.

Amazing Man ran into the kitchen, with all four hooded hoods in pursuit. He tugged a drawer from the cabinet, spraying cutlery across the floor. One of the hoods stepped on a corn cob holder, which pierced the sole of his shoe. He danced on one foot while he tried to pull the corn cob holder free. Amazing Man lunged at him and sent him tumbling into the wall. The impact left a huge crack in the plaster.

The other hoods chased Amazing Man into the living room, where the guests huddled in terror. He tore a painting from the wall (it was a portrait of Mrs. Hawkins and Fredda) and slammed it over the head of the first hooded hood. The hooded head broke through the portrait, and Amazing Man pulled the frame down around the hood's arms.

The biggest hood crept up behind Amazing Man. He raised his crowbar and swung it with all his strength. It struck Amazing Man on his padded side then glanced away harmlessly.

Amazing Man spun around. "That won't work anymore," he grunted. He ripped the crowbar from the hood's grip and flung it aside. It flew across the room and shattered the kitchen window. The hood dove at Amazing Man, but he leapt up and grabbed a light fixture hanging from the

middle of the ceiling. He swung back and then forward, leading with his huge Wellingtons. The light fixture tore free from the ceiling and the wiring dug a deep groove through the stipple. Amazing Man knocked one of the hoods to the ground before the wiring gave out completely and broke, spraying sparks around the room.

Rudy rushed to put out the little fires that were starting, but Amazing Man did not slow down. He hopped from one hood to the next, throwing a punch here, a jab there and all the while dodging the punches and jabs the four of them were throwing back.

He backed one of the hoods against the wall. The hood stomped his boot down hard on Amazing Man's left foot. Amazing Man bawled out in agony. His Wellingtons were the only part of his uniform he had not thought to reinforce with padding and armour. Amazing Man threw a furious punch at the hood, missing his beaked nose by a hair. His fist plunged through the drywall and splintered the underlying 2x4. A crack zig-zagged up the wall and spread onto the ceiling, which sagged slightly.

Amazing Man pulled his fist from the wall and the hood scrambled away from him. Two other hoods jumped into the attack. Amazing Man reached back and wrapped a red-gloved fist around a lamp stand. He lifted it up and held it in front of him in both hands. The hoods backed away as Amazing Man spun, thrust, twirled and parried with his improvised quarterstaff. He jabbed, he blocked, he stabbed. Then Amazing Man planted the lamp pole on the ground and cartwheeled through the air. He closed in on one hood and poked at him with the base of the lamp. The hood ducked and lamp smashed into Stig's television set. Despite Mrs. Hawkins' many imprecations to Stig as a child, the television set did not implode spectacularly. Amazing Man lifted the lamp pole, now with a broken television set hanging from the end, and flung it at the hoods. The television flew through the air, turning slowly, and crashed into a book case. Books, family pictures and a Planet Master collectible, still in its box, tumbled onto the floor.

"Stig!" Jody shouted at Amazing Man. "You're wrecking everything!"

Amazing Man turned and looked at her, then he shook his head and dove back into the melee.

"Stop it Stig!" Jody screamed. "You're not a hero! You're going to get yourself killed!"

"No, I'm not," said a familiar voice behind her. Jody turned and saw Stig standing there. Her Stig. And he was not dressed in orange spandex. He was dressed in his ragged, smelly hockey equipment. His shoulder pads were yellowing, his stockings were mismatched with holes in them and he had big black Wellington boots on his feet. He held a bent

aluminum baseball bat in one hand. Around his arm he had tied Jody's new blue bra, the one she had bought from the catalogue he kept in his bathroom cupboard.

To Jody he looked like a knight in shining armour.

"You mean you're not ..." she started to say.

"Not what?" asked Stig. But she never had a chance to answer, because in the next moment he had thrown himself into the battle as well.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam were still attacking the hoods from the fringes, while Mrs. Hawkins continued to exhort Fredda onto some horrific canine violence. Jody exchanged a glance with Rudy and Grampa Les. They each nodded.

"Let's get them," said Rudy.

"Less be gittin' 'em good," said Grampa Les. He hobbled forward, swinging his cane madly.

"Let's roll," muttered Jody, and she waded in after them.

It was madness, of course, and extremely dangerous. But what would you do, what could you do, if four thugs broke into your home on Christmas Day, crashing your dinner, smashing your traditions? Would you do any less? Could you?

The four hooded hoods were pushed to the corners of the room. In one corner, Iggy, Yugo and Sam wrestled with the smallest of the hoods, in the next, Stig, Jody and Rudy battled with the tallest hood. Grampa Les and Mrs. Hawkins stood back to back as they faced off against the smartest of the hooded hoods and Amazing Man stood alone against the biggest one.

The four hooded hoods were no longer interested in securing the keys to the snowmobile. They realized that they were outnumbered. Now they were only interested in securing their escape.

Stig pressed ahead, using his bat to keep the hooded hood at bay. The hood tried punching and kicking him, but the old stinking hockey equipment proved to be protection enough. Jody had retrieved the Little Stubby Fish Whacker™ from the mess on the kitchen floor and poked the hood with it.

"I don't think you're doing that right," said Stig.

"How should I do it then?" asked Jody. She flipped the Little Stubby in her hand, and then delivered a thunderous backhand swipe across the hood's jaw. Teeth shot across the room and the hood collapsed in a hooded heap.

“The hood has been defeated,” said Rudy. “That must be worth *thousands* of experience points.”

On the opposite side of the room, the smartest of the hoods was cowering before Mrs. Hawkins’ razor edged stare.

“Does your mother know what you’re doing?” she demanded coldly.

The hood shrank back. “N-no ma’am,” he stammered.

“Do you think that your mother would approve of this behaviour?” she asked.

The hood shook his head.

“You probably did not even wash your hands before coming into this house and interrupting our dinner, did you?”

The hooded hood was on his knees now. He was crying.

“Show me!” she shouted. The hood spread his hands out in front of her.

“Just as I thought,” said Mrs. Hawkins, slapping the back of the hood’s hand. “These fingernails are filthy. Your mother would be ashamed.”

The hood lowered his head into his bruised hand and sobbed.

“Oh stop that, you’re making a spectacle of yourself,” said Mrs. Hawkins. She turned to Grampa Les and nodded. Grampa Les swung his cane down onto the weeping hood. It broke in half with a satisfying crack. The hood fell over, unconscious.

A few feet away, the biggest hood grabbed Amazing Man’s cape and pulled it. Not for the first time, the man in orange spandex wondered why he wore a cape at all. It really was a lot more trouble than it was worth, and it was worth quite a bit. And yet, it looked so incredibly cool.

Amazing Man had practised what to do if anyone ever pulled on his cape from behind. He fell to his back and rolled, kicking his legs straight into the air. He flew over the hood and rotated 180 degrees. He even stuck the landing. The hood turned around and found himself face to face with Amazing Man.

“Hey,” said Amazing Man.

“Hey,” answered the biggest hooded hood.

And then Amazing Man knocked him out.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam were in a pitched battle in the adjacent corner. Though they were facing the smallest of the hoods, he was still half as big again as any of them. Moreover, they were toymakers, not fighters. Their punches fell ineffectively and the hooded hood only had to push them to send them tumbling backwards.



He pushed Yugo into Iggy and the two elves fell into the wall. The hood slipped out of Sam's grip and staggered towards the front door. Yugo pulled the key fob from his pocket. The fob was made of black plastic and had a number of coloured buttons and dials on it. He pressed a flashing orange button and turned a dial with his thumb.

On the front lawn, the snowmobile's headlights came on. The engine started up with a soft hum that was almost musical. The snowmobile pivoted and pointed at the front door. The engine hummed a little more loudly.

"Hold him up, Sam," he shouted. Sam climbed onto the hood's back, but the hood just leaned forward and flipped Sam on to the floor. Sam threw himself at the hood, wrapped his arms around his leg and bit down hard on the hood's ankle. The hood bellowed in pain and shook Sam from his leg. Sam flopped uselessly, trying to get up. The hood hurried towards the door.

Yugo pressed down on a yellow knob. The hum from the front lawn grew louder and even more lyrical. It sounded vaguely like a choir of carollers.

The hood reached the broken door at the same time the snowmobile did. Unfortunately for the hood, they were travelling in opposite directions and the snowmobile outweighed him by about three tons. The snowmobile exploded through the doorway, sending plaster, wood and one very surprised hooded hood flying through the house.

The snowmobile roared down the hall, scraping plaster and paintings off of the wall as it passed. It broke through the wall and into the kitchen, the last hood tumbling before it. The sink flipped from the countertop, and a fountain of water sprayed out. The snowmobile finally skidded to a stop, but not before it bumped into the refrigerator, tipping it over and dumping eggs, milk, ice cream and the few beers that Sam had not yet consumed onto the floor. The hood, covered in plaster dust, kept rolling into the living room, where he came to stop at last, next to Amazing Man's red Wellingtons.

Amazing Man pulled the hooded hood by his hood to the center of the room and leaned him against the pile of other hoods. He took another coil of wire from his belt and wrapped it around them, cinching it tightly. Then he touched a finger to the edge of his helmet and said to Jody, "It looks like my work is done here." He swirled his cape and leapt out through the remains of the front window.

The dinner guests walked slowly back through the shattered house. The walls were cracked and plaster dust was leaking down from the ceiling. The kitchen was in disarray, with a snowmobile parked in the middle of it and food, broken dishes and cutlery scattered everywhere. The front



door and most of the front wall was piled in the kitchen, too. Wires hung loosely from above, shooting sparks at irregular intervals. Water spilled from the broken sink onto the floor. It spread out of the kitchen and ran down the stairs.

The dining room was a shambles, with goose, pineapple and truffles heaped on the floor, mixed up with wrecked china, broken crystal and what was once a fine oak table. Sam picked up the broken bottle of elfwine. There was still a little left in the bottom and he slurped it out absently.

Stig took off his hockey helmet and set it down on what was left of the dining room table. Jody sighed. They were all safe and unharmed, but her beautiful dinner was ruined.

“Well,” said Stig, struggling to make some conversation. “Wasn’t that something?”

Jody looked at him and started crying. He put his arm around her to try and comfort her.

“Hello?” said a voice from what had once been the front door. Stig and Jody looked up. It was Alert, with a pot of bean salad in his hands. “I’m sorry I’m late,” he said. “Is dinner over already?”

Jody smiled weakly at him. “Merry Christmas, Al,” she said.

Alert stepped over the wreckage of the front door and set his bean salad down on the only patch of bare floor he could find. He looked up and then made a pained expression. They all turned to see what he was looking at. There, at the end of the room, were Grampa Les and Mrs. Hawkins. They were standing under the mistletoe, making goo goo eyes at one another.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam looked at each other. Words failed them. There simply were no words; for what words could there possibly be? The silence became uncomfortably loud.

Finally, Sam clapped his hands together and said, “anybody up for some Chinese?”



HEY ORDERED TAKE OUT FROM KIM CHEE’S PALACE, the restaurant next door to the martial arts studio. They ate it in the remains of Stig’s dining room, once the police and the reporters had left. The house was surrounded by yellow crime scene tape, which was decorative in its own



way, but not at all Christmassy. Red and green police tape would have been far more seasonal.

They spread chicken fried rice, ginger beef and dumplings around the dining room table. There was no longer any need for booster seats, as the table's legs had all been broken off. Iggy, Yugo and Sam sat cross legged along one side, while Grampa Les and Mrs. Hawkins cuddled on the other.

"More elfwine, Mrs. Hawkins?" asked Grampa Les.

Mrs. Hawkins passed him her chipped and empty crystal wineglass. "You are too kind," she purred in her frosty baritone.

Rudy and Alert shivered uncomfortably. "This bean salad is terrific," said Rudy.

Alert smiled proudly. "It's my mom's recipe."

"What took you so long to get here, anyway?" asked Stig. He was still wearing the old hockey equipment, with Jody's bra tied around his arm. "You missed all the excitement."

"Oh you know me," said Alert. "I'm never on time. I'll probably be late for my own funeral. I can't believe Amazing Man was right here, though. And I missed him."

Stig turned to Jody. "And I can't believe that you thought I was Amazing Man," he said.

"Why not?" asked Jody. "You were always disappearing. And whenever I saw you, you looked like you'd been in a fight."

"And nobody ever saw you and Amazing Man in the same place," added Rudy. "That's always the giveaway."

"Thanks Rudy," said Stig. "That was very helpful."

Rudy raised his coffee mug in a mock toast. It was badly cracked, and elfwine dripped slowly from the bottom.

"So, what have you been up to?" asked Sam.

"Well, if you must know, I was working another job," said Stig.

"What?" exclaimed Jody.

Stig sighed and explained, "I got a job in the Yummy Foods warehouse. They supply frozen food to grocery stores. I would stock shelves with ice cream and frozen pizzas and waffles. I even got to drive a fork lift. But because all of the stock is frozen, the temperature inside the warehouse is kept at 25 degrees below zero. It's like working inside a gigantic freezer. You have to wear a parka and giant gloves, so it's hard to move

and everything is icy and slippery inside. I was forever getting hurt. One time I slipped on the ice and twisted my knee. Another time a bag of frozen peas fell on my face.”

“Is that when you got the black eye?” asked Jody.

Stig nodded. “It really is awful in there. I almost caught pneumonia and had to take a couple of weeks off.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about any of this?” huffed Jody.

“I wanted it to be a surprise,” explained Stig. “I needed to make some extra money, so I could buy your Christmas present.”

“What present?” asked Jody. “You never got me anything.”

Stig reached into his stained hockey shorts and pulled out a small box. He shuffled up onto one knee and handed the box to Jody. “I think it’s time we stopped living so far apart,” he said. “I’d like it if you would share this house, and the rest of your life, with me. Will you?”

Jody opened the box. Inside was a ring with a diamond that sparkled like Christmas snow. Her hand was shaking while Stig pushed the ring onto her finger. She looked around the ruins of Stig’s house, the broken plaster, the leaking pipes, the stray wires and knew that there was no where else in the world that she wanted to be.

“Yes, of course I will,” she replied.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam cheered and toasted Stig and Jody with their cracked glasses. Alert and Rudy came around and congratulated the happy couple. Then they all poured more elfwine and sang some Christmas songs. Even Mrs. Hawkins joined in. Everyone could feel the lov in the air.

The party carried on until after the sun came up the next morning. And even though the goose was lost in the brawl, they all agreed that Jody’s dinner was the best Christmas dinner, ever.



HE SUN RISES LATE ON THE DAY AFTER CHRISTMAS, and so does almost everybody else. He did not collect the morning paper from the front door until late in the afternoon.

He took it downstairs and set it on the table beside the police scanner. On the adjacent wall, the expensive pleather cape hung from its hook, with the big red Wellingtons neatly arranged beneath it. He poured himself a cup of coffee and then sat down to read the news.



The front page featured a colour picture of Stig's house. Two police officers were leading four hooded hoods through a hole in the front of the house and into a white van. Above the picture the headline screamed, **"AMAZING MAN SAVES CHRISTMAS!"**

He set the paper down and sat thoughtfully for a while. Then he reached under the table and retrieved the copy of Captain Justice No. 334 from the floor. One of the corners was a little bent and he pressed it smooth again on his leg. He carefully slipped it back into its place on the long table with the other books.

He returned to his seat by the police scanner and read through the article. If Amazing Man was good enough to save Christmas, then maybe he could be Amazing Man. He sipped his coffee. Besides, Captain Justice was kid stuff. Baby stuff, even.

The police scanner buzzed. Alert Darr set down his coffee and reached for his red pleather cape. Christmas was over for another year. It was time to get back to work.

THE END.
