

FREAKY CHRISTMAS DAY

ANOTHER SEQUEL

IGGY STEPPED OUT FROM BEHIND the shattered brick wall and made his way carefully down the empty street. Abandoned buildings lined either side of the block, their windows broken or missing. Pieces of glass crunched beneath his studded boots. Nearby, a burning gasoline slick coughed thick black smoke into the brown sky. Screams sounded in the distance. Iggy ignored these. Screams in the distance could not hurt him.

He made his way stealthily to the overturned armoured truck, which was still smouldering from the exploding shells he had shot into it. Iggy reached into the window with his mechanical arm and collected a heavy box of ammunition. There were only 12 bullets in the box, but they would have to do. He ducked behind the wreck and loaded the cartridges into his Mammoth IV automatic rifle. Each bullet was the size of a soda can. The Mammoth IV was the sort of elephant gun that could take down a mastodon. He knew that, because he had taken one down only twenty minutes earlier. He reached the rifle over the top of the vehicle and launched a few of the enormous rounds into the street.

Satisfied that it was safe to proceed, Iggy rolled out from behind the truck and crept into the middle of the road. There was a checkpoint in the next block. If Iggy could make it there, he would be safe. He took a deep breath of the dusty air and continued his slow march down the street.

He reached the intersection and a black hooded figure jumped out from behind a heap of stinking trash. He fired at Iggy from the two small guns gripped in his hands.

“Oh crumb,” cursed Iggy. The first bullet struck him in the shoulder and knocked him to his knees. Iggy glanced down at the dent in his body armour. It was holding up for now, but it would not last much longer. Iggy raised the Mammoth IV and fired, shredding the hooded figure with his remaining bullets.

Iggy stood up and walked over to the hooded pile on the ground. He poked the tattered corpse with the barrel of his rifle. He noticed a laser knife protruding from the figure's boot. Iggy took it, and hooked it weightlessly to his belt. The laser knife would come in handy, but what he really needed were bullets. The firefight with the Zombie Queen had nearly exhausted his ammunition.

He looked up. He could see the checkpoint now. A red light glowed softly in a window in a building on the opposite corner. He was nearly there. He took a few steps towards it, and then stopped.

Three dark shapes shambled into the intersection. They looked like giant fur covered birds and waddled awkwardly on gnarly, bowed legs. When they saw Iggy, they gave a guttural scream and launched themselves into the air.

"Scuttlebats," thought Iggy. "I hate those things." They would be on him in a moment. Iggy holstered the Mammoth IV, pulled out his pulse cannon and powered it up. He took aim at the first scuttlebat and fired. A red ball of energy burst from his pulse cannon and struck the scuttlebat in the chest. It spun to the ground, then swooped back into the air and bore down on Iggy. "It always takes two shots," muttered Iggy and fired again. A second red ball hammered into the scuttlebat. This time its wings folded back and it fell hard on to the ground. It did not get up. Iggy turned to the second scuttlebat and fired off two quick blasts. The beast spun away from the first, but the second caught it on one of its tattered wings. It made a wide, sweeping turn before heading back towards Iggy. Once more Iggy fired the pulse cannon. The red ball of energy that shot out seemed smaller and fainter than before. Still, it struck the scuttlebat high on the chest. It gave a low squawk and fell to the pavement.

The third scuttlebat was almost upon him. Iggy pressed the trigger, but nothing happened. He looked down at the pulse cannon, which whined softly as it slowly powered back up.

"Oh bother," said Iggy. His energy pack was running low. If he did not reach the checkpoint soon and recharge it, he would be helpless. The scuttlebat placed a leathery claw on Iggy's shoulder and begun pumping its wings, lifting the elf into the air. The useless pulse cannon fell to the ground as Iggy struggled to get free. He fumbled at his belt and retrieved a concussion grenade. He grunted as he pulled the pin from the grenade with his teeth and then stuffed the armed device into the folds of the scuttlebat's fur. He twisted from the scuttlebat's grasp and fell several feet to the ground as the grenade exploded with a shuddering BOOM. Iggy covered his head as blood and other bits of scuttlebat splattered over him.

He climbed to his feet and wiped the gore from his shoulder plate. His body armour had saved him again, but it was badly damaged now. Iggy's chest plate swung open uselessly. He needed to reach the checkpoint, now.

He decided not to take any more chances. He drew his flamethrower from his side and sprayed fire across the intersection. Sweat poured down his face, but he kept it up until his fuel ran out.

"That should clear the way," he thought. He lowered the nozzle and waited for the flames to die down. The path ahead seemed safe. Iggy jogged across the street and the door to the checkpoint swung open. Only a few more steps, he thought.

A tall man in shining green body armour stepped out of the building. Iggy slid to a stop. His boot struck a bleached skull, which rolled away unevenly. He drew the laser knife and held it before him and took another step toward the door to the checkpoint.


The armoured man shook his head. He reached to his back and drew out a gleaming silver weapon.

Iggy blinked. It was the FYU Annihilator Cannon. Those were almost impossible to find. Iggy backed away, searching desperately for cover. The man pulled the handgrip on the top of the FYU and a stream of blue electric energy jagged across the street. Iggy dove to the side as the energy beam tore a gash into the crumbling asphalt. He struggled to his feet just as a second energy bolt smashed into him and threw him backwards. He could feel his armour disintegrating.

Iggy looked up weakly at his attacker. The man raised his yellow visor and smiled. It was Sam.

Iggy's last concussion grenade began beeping on his belt. He reached his blackened arm to grab it, but he had no strength left and it fell from his limp hand and lay on the road, glowing and beeping more quickly. He blinked helplessly as the grenade exploded and blew him into pieces.

"Cool," said Sam.

 IN ANOTHER STREET, IN ANOTHER CITY thousands of miles away, Jody Noles paused at the corner. She looked left, then right and left again before carefully crossing the road. It was a chilly December morning, but the sun was shining brightly in the clear blue sky. Her feet left little prints in the sparkling snow that had fallen the night before. Jody took a deep breath and smiled. Christmas was coming.

Jody was pretty in that kind of way, if you know what I mean. She had long tangled dark hair; a crooked smile and eyes that were sometimes green and sometimes gray. That kind of way. She was wearing her fuzzy pink winter jacket and carried a package under her arm.

There were no burning cars to be seen, no winged monsters and no dangerous armoured men. Each of the houses on the block were neatly maintained and most had coloured lights hanging from the eaves. Nothing was burning or broken.

Well, almost nothing. There was one house that stood out from the others. It was shrouded in plastic tarpaulins. A sheet of weathered plywood was nailed into the wooden frame that once held a pretty picture window. The roof sagged a little.

There was a big truck and a white limousine parked in front of the broken little house. Jody looked at them bemused, then opened the front gate and strode up the sidewalk. She reached the front door and opened it slowly. It was mostly held on with string, and if she pushed it too hard, she knew that it would fall off.

She stepped into the front room, which was filled with chunks of broken plaster. A loop of wire hung down through a gap in the ceiling. Jody took off her coat and hung it on a broken two by four that protruded out of the wall.

“Stig,” she called. “I’m home.”

A tall man with short black hair and dark eyes thundered down the stairs. She skipped over to him and gave him a hug.

“I have good news,” he said.

“Oh really, me too,” she replied.

“Mine is better,” he said.

“I doubt it,” said she.

“Oh it definitely is.”

“Not a chance.”

“Oh, there is a chance.”

“No way.”

“Way.”

“What is this good news then?” she asked.

“You go first,” said Stig.

“No, you,” said Jody.

“No, you,” said Stig

“You.”

“You.”

“You.”

“You.”

“You.”

“You.”

“Okay, fine, I’ll go first,” said Jody. “I just got back from the post office. All of the invitations are in the mail. And someone sent us this.” She held out the brown paper package.

Stig looked at it. “Hmmmmm,” Stig hmmmmed thoughtfully. “Who is it from?” he asked.

“I have no idea,” said Jody. I thought we could open it together.”

“That is good news, I suppose. But my news is better.”

“Oh really,” said Jody.

“Yes really,” said Stig.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Oh, really.”

“Yes, really.”

“Well, what is this brilliant news then?” Jody looked at one of the cracks in the kitchen tile. “Did you finally find someone to fix the house?”

Stig’s face fell. His house had been in a woeful state of disrepair since four thugs had broken in on their Christmas dinner the year before. With the help of Amazing Man, not to mention Iggy, Yugo and Sam, the four hoods had been subdued, but not before Stig’s house had been nearly destroyed.

It had been like that ever since. His insurance company had denied coverage – it claimed that his policy did not include damage caused as a result of snowmobiles or superheroes on the premises. The adjuster pointed to the list of exclusions printed in microscopic type on page 444 of the policy, which included, at the very end, the following:

Exclusion 108: Additional Snowmobile and Superhero Exclusions - This policy does not cover damage, of whatsoever nature or kind, which is caused or contributed to by, or in any way results from, the presence of a snowmobile in, near, or about the residence. In this exclusion, “snowmobile” includes any vehicle or craft capable of traveling upon or through snow, sleet or inclement weather of every nature and kind, and includes any means of conveyance whether powered by gas, electricity, nuclear fusion or gravity. Nor does this policy provide coverage for any loss, damage, injury or death brought about in any manner by the actions or inactions of any man, woman or thing with enhanced or super powers or crime fighting abilities, including, but not limited to any special powers or skills resulting from laboratory accidents, alien activity, radiation or magic; nor does this policy provide any indemnity whatsoever from the actions or

inactions of any costumed crime fighting individual, whether such individual possesses enhanced or special powers or gifts, nor any groups of costumed crime fighting individuals as aforesaid, nor to any supervillains or groups of supervillains or any person or thing who is motivated by the pursuit of truth, justice or world conquest. Nor does this policy provide coverage for any damage caused by any combination of snowmobiles or superheroes, whether acting in concert or separately. Notwithstanding anything detailed in the hereinbefore paragraph and subsidiary clauses, and for greater certainty, this policy does not provide coverage for damage caused by water buffalo, acts of monotheistic or polytheistic deities, hail, or any other thing of any kind at all, ever.

The other 107 exclusions in the policy similarly seemed to have been designed to remove the insurance company's responsibility for any damage caused by anything. The adjuster explained that it was all standard stuff, and that if Stig had been particularly concerned about it, he should have purchased the optional Snowmobile and Super Hero Demolition Rider.

Stig was outraged and immediately hired a lawyer. But the only lawyer he could afford was his friend Lance, and Lance was really not much of a lawyer. He explained that it could take years to get a settlement. In the meantime, Stig continued to live in a house that needed substantial repairs before it could even be called dilapidated.

"As a matter of fact, I did find someone to fix the house," said Stig.

"Really?" said Jody, her face blushing with excitement. "Who?"

"Him," said Stig.

Jody turned to face a tall man with wild eyes, wild hair and an uneven beard on his chin. He was dressed in a sleeveless flannel shirt and blue jeans. He wore a large leather tool belt, but there did not appear to be any tools in it. Indeed, the only thing in the belt was a big red bullhorn, which the man pulled out and raised to his face.

"Hello Jody!" the man shouted into the bullhorn. His voice crackled out at an exceedingly uncomfortable volume.

Jody winced. "Um ... hello," she said. She whispered out of the side of her mouth, "Stig, who is this guy?"

"I'm Pie Tenninate, and you're on *Really Extremely Made Over Homes!*"

Jody put her face in her hands, "Oh no," she sighed.

Every week, on *Really Extremely Made Over Homes*, Pie and his team of designers and carpenters marched into the house of an unfortunate family, which had been struck by illness or tragedy of some kind. Pie shouted a bit at the family through his megaphone, then spirited them away for a week while the crew completely gutted and remodelled the house. At the end of the week, the family returned to find that their cosy home had been turned into an ostentatious mansion. The episode typically concluded with a lot of tears of joy, some hyperventilating and more hugs than you might see at a meeting of the Hugging Club, Local 17. The program was contrived and maudlin, but the ratings were killer.

“Stig and Jody, we’re really extremely making your home over, right NOW!” Pie shouted into his bullhorn.

And with that, two burly men grabbed Stig and Jody and ushered them through the front door, which promptly fell from its hinges.

“Wait!” shouted Jody. “You can’t do this now! We’re getting married next week!”

“And we’ll be right there with you!” Pie bellowed into his bullhorn. “Because you are getting married right here in this house next week on *Really Extremely Made Over Homes!*”

Jody glared at Stig. He just shrugged and said, “sorry, it was the only thing I could come up with. They won’t fix the house unless we get married on the show. Or unless one of us gets cancer.”

Jody blinked. She did not really want to get married on television, nor did she want cancer. But, Stig’s house was desperately in need of repair and they were going to have to wait years for the insurance company to come through, if it ever did. It seemed like she really had no choice.

“All right,” she whispered. “I just don’t know what my mother will say.”

“All right!” hollered Pie. “Let’s *Do IT!!*”

Jody tucked her package under her arm, and together she and Stig stepped out of the broken doorway. They walked past a camera crew, and meandered through a crowd of neighbours who had gathered to wave and cheer at them as they climbed into the white limousine waiting at the end of the sidewalk.

Stig sat beside Jody in the back of the limousine. One of the producers passed them each a glass of champagne, while another producer passed them a stack of waivers and releases to sign.

“It’s going to be an interesting week,” said Jody.

“You have no idea,” said Stig.

And she did not have any idea how interesting a week it would be. But then, neither did Stig.



HE PRESTIGIOUS OFFICES OF THE PRESTIGIOUS law firm of Padd & Gowdge LLP were most prestigious indeed. The highly paid lawyers of Padd and Gowdge LLP fancied themselves prestigious people and they liked to surround themselves with prestigious things.

The vast reception area was tiled in marble that had been imported from the French Alps. The walls were covered with three layers of wallpaper,

with hand painted flowers on each layer. The room was furnished with carefully positioned glass tables and matching glass chairs that built by hand by sixth generation Swiss craftsmen. Most people can only dream of walking through a room so prestigious.

Lance Boyle walked through the prestigious reception area of the prestigious law offices of Padd & Gowdge LLP on his way to his office every single morning. Lance Boyle was an intellectual property lawyer. By this, it must be clearly understood that Lance was not an intellectual who practiced property law. Rather, Lance was a lawyer who practiced in the field of intellectual property law. Intellectual property is the name given to certain types of intangible property, like copyrights or trademarks.

Lance Boyle was not an intellectual. He was far from it. Lance's intellect might most charitably be described as "limited" or "spotty" or "not really much of an intellect so much at all, really." Most people who knew Lance described him less charitably as a ninny.

Lance's idiocy had not, however, prevented him from achieving considerable success in the practice. Lance was that special kind of lawyer that every law firm likes. Because he was such a ninny, it took him three or four times as long to complete his assignments than a smarter, more capable lawyer would require. And there was little use for smart, capable lawyers in the practice of the prestigious law firm of Padd & Gowdge LLP.

This was because smart, capable lawyers are also efficient lawyers. Because the legal profession makes its money charging by the hour, those lawyers who record the most time are able to send the biggest bills. There is nothing the partners of prestigious law firms like Padd & Gowdge LLP like better than a big biller. As Mr Padd always said, "the worth of a day is measured, not by one's successes, but by the length of one's time slip." Lance, who muddled ponderously through even the simplest tasks, was highly regarded by the partners of Padd & Gowdge LLP precisely because he was a ninny. A slow, ponderous, bumbling, big billing ninny.

Right now, Lance was staring at a file on the left corner of his desk. It had lain there untouched for weeks because Lance did not have a clue what to do with it. He stared at it numbly for 30 minutes, then sighed and recorded 0.5 hours on his time sheet. Then he scratched out the 0.5 and replaced it with a 0.75. After all, he had spent about 15 minutes wondering what to do with that same file that very morning in the shower. At an hourly rate of \$450, Lance had just made \$337.50 for the prestigious firm of Padd & Gowdge LLP without actually having done anything at all.

The file on the corner of Lance's desk was file number 77025-01, Stig Hawkins re Insurance Matter. Lance had taken the file on a year ago when his friend Stig had first gotten into a dispute with his insurance company. Lance did not really understand anything about insurance policies, or contracts or lawsuits, but that had not kept him from recording almost \$20,000.00 in fees on his friend's file, without actually accomplishing anything.

Stig's house lay in ruins, but Lance's time reports were as lengthy, detailed and complete as ever.

This was especially important at that time of year. With only a week until Christmas, there was a big push on throughout the firm to bill as many hours as possible before the accounting department closed its books on the fiscal year. Lance had recorded almost 3000 hours already that year, a new personal best. He was in line for a big raise and perhaps a promotion to junior non-equity partner. He was so far ahead of his billing target that for the first time in nearly 15 years, he was considering taking Christmas Day off. Not just the morning like he usually did, but the entire day.

The legal profession, it is said, is a venerable and honourable profession. Of course, the people who say that are all, themselves, lawyers. Most sensible people, which is to say most people who are not, themselves, lawyers, recognize that the legal profession is largely comprised of slow, ponderous and dim witted fellows a lot like Lance Boyle. But lawyers as a whole, not only lack any particular intellect, they are also completely lacking in any form of self awareness. They are the kind of people who believe that their own farts do not smell.

Lance turned to the next file on his desk. It was labelled "Personal Integrated Interacter: Re Patent Application." Lance grinned. Patent applications were his speciality. He had done hundreds of them. And he had even successfully registered a patent once. He opened the file and read about the Personal Integrated Interacter. Then he whistled. "This will never work," he thought. "Nobody in the world could invent such a thing." He shook his head, and then wrote down 1.0 hours on his time sheet for the 20 minutes he had spent reading the file.

He stared down at the long column of numbers on his time slip, and mentally calculated that he had posted almost 26 hours that day. A good day's work, he supposed, though he would try to work a little harder the next day. That is, he was determined to work a little longer the next day, though quite possibly no harder.

Lance Boyle got up from his desk and began packing his briefcase. As he bent over, he emitted a burbly burst of flatulence. He stood up and sniffed the air. It was true – his farts had no odour at all. He frowned slightly and went back to packing his bags.

“COOL,” REPEATED SAM. He placed his controller on the table in front of the big television. “That is the most amazing video game ever. You’ve really outdone yourself, Yugo.”

Yugo beamed from the other side of the room. He was seated on the big leather reclining chair in the TV room of Elves Barracks B. The gigantic plasma screen showed the image of an armoured man bending over the body of his beaten foe.

Iggy lay back on the sofa, beside Sam, his eyes glazed over. Yugo walked over and gently patted his cheek. Iggy blinked a few times and sat up.

“That was ... incredible,” he whispered. Iggy, Yugo and Sam were elves, who worked in the toy factory at the North Pole. Iggy was a slender fellow and tall, for an elf. He had small dark eyes and a mop of black hair that was always messy, no matter how much he combed it. Yugo was shorter and stouter, with bright eyes and a large black moustache. He was a brilliant inventor, who was always developing new and unique toys, as well as a variety of doohickies and thingammies. Sam had curly red hair and a sour disposition. Some might describe him as ‘big-boned’ even though most people do not have big bones in their belly.

“It felt so real,” said Sam. “Like we were actually inside the game.”

“You were inside the game,” said Yugo.

“I mean actually inside the game,” said Iggy.

“You were actually inside the game,” said Yugo. “He stroked the console tenderly. “This is the next generation of video gaming systems. In fact, it is really a generation or two after the next generation of video gaming systems. It is the great great grandchild of today’s video gaming systems. I call it the Personal Integrated Interacter, or Pii for short.”

“How does it work?” asked it Iggy. He rubbed his chest gently. “It actually hurts a little.”

Yugo waved at the big screen. “You see, in most video games you just watch the action unfold on a television screen. And some of those systems, if you have high definition video and surround sound, are very impressive. But when you Pii, you really let it all hang out. When you start a game, your consciousness actually leaves your body, travels up through the control cables and into the console where it enters the game environment.”

“What do you mean by my consciousness?” asked Sam.

“What I mean is that piece inside you that is who you are. Your awareness. Your personality. The stuff inside you that makes you, well, you. Your soul, if you will.”

“My soul goes into the game?” Iggy gasped, aghast. “But won’t that kill me?”

“Oh, don’t worry, it’s perfectly safe,” said Yugo. “The Pii only requires all of your higher intellectual functions. It leaves behind the bits that are in charge of making your body work. So your heart keeps on beating and your lungs keep on breathing while you, yourself, are inside the game. You just look like you are asleep, even though you are actually playing a game inside the Pii. And, because your body is safely out here, you can’t really be hurt or killed in there.” He nodded towards the television screen. “If your character is killed in the game, your consciousness just flows back up through the control cables and into your body, none the worse for wear.”

Iggy and Sam stared at Yugo numbly.

“Well, what do you think?” asked Yugo.

“I think I want a rematch,” said Iggy.

PIE TENNINATE WAS HAVING A BAD TIME on the set of *Really Extremely Made Over Homes* and it was making him shout a lot. Nobody on the set realized that Pie was having a bad day, because he was a person who shouted a lot even when he was in a good mood. He shouted at everyone, the carpenters, the suppliers and most of all, the television audience, all through a completely superfluous red bullhorn. Some of the camera crew thought he was perhaps a little more shouty than usual, but it was the first day of the shoot, and there was still a lot of work to be done.

The reason that Pie was having a bad day was that this episode of *Really Extremely Made Over Homes* had no beginning. The first part of the show always involved the demolition of the subject home, sometimes with a big wrecking ball, or a tank on loan from the Army or even a group of high school kids with sledgehammers. But this week’s house, Stig’s house, was already seriously damaged. There were holes in the walls, the ceiling sagged dangerously and water leaked everywhere. Worst of all, the crew had not been able to capture any of this carnage on tape.

So, in order to give this episode a beginning, thirty carpenters had been hired to rebuild Stig’s house exactly to its original condition. The plan then was to bring in a troop of actors to re-enact the mayhem of the previous Christmas and destroy the house, only this time with the cameras rolling. It would be dramatic and exciting. It would be reality television at its most real; even though it would be entirely staged.

It was an elegant solution to the problem, but it involved a lot of extra work and, most important, a lot of extra money. Pie's money. Pie hated it when he had to spend his own money on the program's homes.

Although Pie oversaw a multi million dollar home renovation every week on *Really Extremely Made Over Homes*, he never really had to spend too much of his own money on the projects. For the most part, the homes on the program were really extremely made over by sponsors, who provided equipment and labour free of charge on the understanding that their logos and trade names would be prominently featured on the program. But since none of the rebuilding Pie needed to do to shoot his beginning sequence would ever be shown on television, none of Pie's sponsors were interested in paying for it. Pie was forced to pay for the entire reconstruction himself, and then hire actors to knock it all down. All so he could rebuild it again into something glorious that his 40 million fans would love.

It all made Pie angry and it made him shout a lot. "These people better love what we are doing for them!" Pie screamed into his bullhorn. "They better be really happy about all of this!"

Ironically, Stig and Jody would have loved nothing more than to have their house back exactly the way it was. But that would not make for good television and Pie was all about good television. Good television was engrossing, entertaining and extremely profitable. Pie was all about extremely profitable. Sometimes when Pie thought about really extreme profits, he even set down his bullhorn for a bit.

But not today. The house had been entirely rebuilt in a single afternoon. The sun was setting. It was time to shoot the demolition sequence. The actors were all in place around the Christmas table. There were stand ins for Stig and Jody and all their guests. They performed their roles from a script that Pie had written, where the Stig look-alike made an eloquent toast about the meaning of Christmas. Then, a gang of ninjas burst in and a great brawl ensued, which involved stuntmen fighting in the air on invisible wires. It all ended when a large red snowmobile (a prop snowmobile that had cost Pie almost \$100,000.00 to build) flew through the front of the house.

Pie smirked as the newly rebuilt kitchen collapsed on itself. Everything had gone perfectly. Stig's house once again lay in ruins and it had all been filmed. Pie would edit it down to the most enthralling five minutes of reality television ever made. This will be great television he thought. Maybe it would even be really extremely profitable television after all.

ONCE AGAIN, IGGY STOOD IN THE BLEAK and ruined street. A skeletal bird flew past. Its dischordant call echoed between the empty buildings. Iggy sniffed the air. He smelled burning fuel and rotten trash, yet he knew this sensation was only a line of code Yugo had written into the game for his soul to find, when it walked down the street that Yugo had made.

He manoeuvred carefully along a broken store window, ever alert for any sign of Sam. Iggy did not care what Yugo said, his ribs did hurt where Sam had shot him with the FYU Annihilator Cannon and he desperately wanted a little payback for that. The kind of payback you can only get by blowing one of your very best friends' head off with a really, really big gun.

To do that, Iggy was going to have to find a really, really big gun. Yugo had hidden various weapons and ammunition here and there throughout the game. The best players were not just the best marksmen, they were the best at seeking out and finding the best arms.

Iggy ducked through the broken window and into the little market. It had been thoroughly looted and the shelves were all broken and bare. He crawled behind the counter, where he found a handgun and a box of bullets. It was a good start. He quickly loaded the gun and stuffed it into his belt. He knew that somewhere in the devastated city Sam was scrambling to arm himself. Iggy was going to be ready for him this time.

He ran to the back of the store and kicked open a door labelled "Employees Only". The door broke away easily from its frame, but Iggy still felt the shock of the impact in his knees. How had Yugo done this?

He walked into a storage room. There were boxes on the shelves with labels like "beans", "corn" and "mushy peas". Iggy wrinkled his nose and turned to the opposite wall. There was a chest freezer there with a padlock on it. Iggy pulled the revolver from his belt and shot at the lock. The first bullet embedded itself in the lid of the freezer, but the second broke the lock apart.

"I really need to practice my aim," muttered Iggy. He lifted the lid and a fog of frozen air rose up. He waved the cloud away then looked down in delighted shock to see a fully loaded FYU Annihilator Cannon resting on a case of frozen pizzas. He picked up the weapon and turned it in his hands. It was heavy and hummed with murderous menace.

"This will do nicely," he thought. "Very nicely indeed." The FYU Annihilator Cannon was the most dangerous weapon in the game. A single shot meant almost certain death to your opponent and, with that, certain victory. All Iggy had to do now was to find Sam.

Of course, at that very moment, Sam was looking to find Iggy. Sam had already accumulated an impressive collection of weaponry: the grimly

lethal gatling gun, the shockingly fatal sonic disruptor, the awesomely devastating rocket launcher, and last, though no sensible person anywhere could possibly consider it the least¹ of his armaments, the abominably evil neural disintegrator, whose infra red ray could shut down a target's entire nervous system at a hundred paces.

There were four things that Iggy did not know as he stepped out of the broken store window back into the street. The first was that Sam had positioned the grimly lethal gatling gun to his left, and set it to automatically begin firing as soon as anyone walked into its sights. The second was that Sam had set up the shockingly fatal sonic disruptor in a second floor ledge and programmed it to emit its deadly sound waves at anything that moved within its range. Likewise, and this was the third thing of which Iggy was entirely unaware as he left the security of the abandoned shop, Sam had trained the awesomely devastating rocket launcher to launch its mortal payload at anything that crossed its path. Lastly, and it is safe to say, if anything at all in this paragraph could be safely said, most definitely not least, Iggy was blissfully ignorant of the fact that Sam himself was aiming the abominably evil neural disintegrator directly at him as he walked up the dark road and that he was even then pulling back on the trigger.

There was one thing that Sam did not know as he unleashed the infra red coloured beam of the abominably evil neural disintegrator at Iggy and this was that Iggy had spotted Sam's hiding place a few moments earlier and that in that time Iggy had pointed the almost certainly deadly beam of the FYU Annihilator Cannon right at him and that as soon as Iggy pressed the button on the remote launcher in his hand, it would be all over for Sam, in the sense of being a living character in the game.

Eight things happened all at once. The last of these was not the least of them and was, in terms of all that happened after, the most of them. But it is the last thing on this list of things because it was the last of the things that happened all at once which actually happened. Sometimes the last thing on a list is the last thing on the list, not because it is not the least of things, but because it is just the last of them.


First, Iggy broke an electromagnetic beam and the grimly lethal gatling gun to his left began pumping a stream of bullets at him. Second, he stepped into the range of the shockingly fatal sonic disruptor and it

¹ The expression 'last but not least' is an overused cliché of the worst kind. To spice up this horridly overworked phrase, some people will say 'last, but definitely not least' or words to that effect. It has come to the point that one can generally assume that the last item (or place, or name) in any given catalogue of items (or places, or names) is most assuredly not the least of them. Which leads one to wonder, if the particular item is not the least of those on a list, why does the speaker save it for the end of the list? And does that mean the penultimate item on the list is actually the least? Does the order in which items (or places, or names) are listed matter a titch?

emitted a wall of sound at him that would momentarily reduce his bones to jelly. Third, the awesomely devastating rocket launcher automatically launched an awesomely devastating rocket at whatever came within its sights, which in this case, was Iggy. Fourth, Sam finished squeezing the trigger of the abominably evil neural disintegrator and even then its horrific infra red beam bore down with undoubtedly fatal effect at Iggy's nervous system.

Fifth, Iggy pressed the flashing red button on the remote control in his pocket and a jagged stream of electric death burst from the FYU Annihilator Cannon and tore into Sam.

The next thing that happened was that Iggy died. And Sam died. And the last thing that happened, as has been mentioned, was not the least of the things that happened then, but rather was the most of them.

 AS HOMEOWNERS ON *REALLY EXTREMELY MADE OVER HOMES*, Stig and Jody expected to be treated to an all expense stay in a luxury hotel while their home was being remodelled. However, because of the additional costs that Pie had incurred in rebuilding and then redestroying Stig's house, in this instance he had chosen accommodations for Stig and Jody that were somewhat less luxurious than was usually the case. In this case, Pie had put Stig and Jody up in a spare room over his garage.

Keep in mind that Pie's garage was itself quite luxurious. It had space for ten cars, all of them foreign, all of them small and all of them egregiously expensive. The floor was lined with marble tile, also foreign and expensive. There were paintings on the wall and a small fireplace in one corner. The garage was heated year round to an exact temperature of 21 degrees Celsius, with a humidity of 80% and a barometric pressure of exactly 101.3 kilopascals. A team of three full time mechanics worked in the garage maintaining Pie's fleet of automobiles.

The three mechanics also lived in rooms above the garage. It goes without saying, though it will be said here for the sake of completeness, that the rooms above the garage provided accommodations that were comfortable, but far less luxurious than that enjoyed by the ten motor vehicles below. There was no marble tile, no modern art and no fireplace. The beds were comfortable, the television worked and there was a small kitchen with a refrigerator and a stove. There were board games in the closet and clean towels under the sink. The bathroom was a bit of a mess, but that was because they shared it with the three mechanics.

Stig and Jody had been taken in their limousine directly to a fine French restaurant, where the camera crew followed them inside. Then they were taken to Pie's garage. The camera crew did not follow them there and did not take any pictures of the garage. The television audience of *Really Extremely Made Over Homes* would eventually see footage of Stig and Jody in the restaurant spliced together with some stock shots of a resort in the Bahamas, giving every impression that Stig and Jody had spent a fun filled week in the tropics. Pie called this type of editing 'keeping it real'.

The reality which the reality television program did not show was a bit more real than Pie's version of reality.²

"How bad can it be?" thought Jody after the limousine had dropped them off and a comely production assistant had shown them to their rooms. Pretty bad, as it turns out. Three mechanics with an appetite for pastrami burritos can really tear apart a bathroom.

By the second day of their stay in the garage, they were both getting a little bored. That was when Stig asked Jody about the package.

"What package?" replied Jody.

"The package you picked up yesterday."

"I didn't pick up a package."

"Yes you did."

"No, I didn't," she said.

"Yes you did," he said.

"Did not."

"Did to."

"Didn't."

"Did."

"Didn't."

"Did."

"Didn't."

"You did so. Look, it's right there on the table," said Stig, pointing at a package wrapped in brown paper which Jody had brought with her to the garage, set down on the table and completely forgotten about in all of the excitement.

² This is the first time in history that anyone has ever used the word 'reality' three times in a single sentence along with the word 'real'. Too bad there is not a large cash prize for this sort of thing.

“Oh, that package,” said Jody. “Why didn’t you say so. I completely forgot about it in all of the excitement.”

“Who is it from?”

“I don’t know,” answered Jody. “It was waiting for me at the Post Office when I mailed the last of the invitations to the wedding. It does not have a return address. It doesn’t even have any stamps.”

“Weird,” said Stig.

“Weird things seem to happen more often than not, these days,” said Jody.

“This is true,” said Stig. And it was true. In the last couple of years Stig had flown on a dragon and stood back to back with a real superhero while he defended his own house. “But it wouldn’t seem like Christmas without something weird happening.”

Jody peeled the brown paper back from the package. She pulled out a box with a note taped to it. She grinned.

“It’s a gift from Iggy, Yugo and Sam!” she said.

“What is it?” asked Stig. Already he was wondering whether something weird was about to happen.³

“It’s some sort of a video gaming system.” She pulled a black cube out of the box along with a bundle of wires and cables.

Stig’s eyes grew bigger. Video games were almost as good as comic books as far as he was concerned. He reached into the box and pulled out a thin plastic case with the name “Urban Death Match 2008” written on the cover in stylized type.

“Ooooooh, sounds like fun,” said Stig. He flipped open the case and pulled out a gleaming silver disc. “Wanna play?”



THE LAST, BUT NOT LEAST, THING THAT HAPPENED was that Iggy blinked. He was a little disoriented, but he supposed that was to be expected after his soul had been ejected from a video game and back into his body.

Except that his body was sitting beside him on the sofa. And it was looking at him and blinking and it seemed to be just as disoriented as he felt, and he was feeling more disoriented with each passing instant.

“What the ... ” said Iggy. But it was not Iggy that said it. Oh, Iggy saw him mouth the words “what the ... ” and he heard the words “what the

³ It was.

...” come out of his own mouth, complete with the “...” part, but he had not said those words himself.⁴

He shook his head and there was something that felt entirely wrong about that. He was watching his head while he shook it, and the head he was shaking was not that head. It was a different head. Iggy’s head was a narrow one, with a long narrow nose and high cheeks. This head that he was shaking was a bigger, rounder and heavier head. And he could feel his cheeks flapping. His cheeks never flapped, they were too fair and delicate for there to be any flapping. But these cheeks he was shaking were most definitely flapping. He gave them another flap to be sure and there could be no doubt. They flapped.

He rubbed his eyes then blinked again and stared at his hands. His fingers were huge. His hands looked like a ripe bunch of bananas. Those were not his hands. His fingers were long and quick. These fingers were thick and round like sausages. There was only one elf who had hands like that.

“Sam?” said Iggy weakly.

“Yes?” answered Sam. But it was Iggy that said it. Iggy saw himself say it and he heard himself say “yes?” in his own voice, but he did not say it.

“Where are you?” asked Iggy. He noticed that his voice did not sound like his voice. It seemed a little higher and, somehow, a little more sarcastic than his voice usually sounded.

“I’m right here,” answered Iggy from beside him. That voice sounded like his voice, though just a little different. It sounded the way his voice sounded when he heard it on a recording.

“No you’re not,” answered Iggy in his high sarcastic voice. “That’s not you. That’s me.”

Iggy saw Iggy shake his head. “No, it’s me. It’s Sam,” said Iggy in his tape recorder voice.

“But you’re me,” said Iggy. “At least I think you are. But I’m me. Or at least I think I am. But something’s wrong. I don’t feel like me.” He looked at his hands and flexed his chubby fingers. His red velvet jacket had ketchup stains on the cuffs. “I feel like, like you.”

“Like who?” asked Iggy.

“Like Sam,” said Iggy. And Iggy nodded his agreement.

“Yes, I see what you mean,” Iggy replied. “I don’t feel like me. I feel like you.”

“Like who?” asked Iggy.

⁴ Especially not the “...” part. Iggy never says that.

“Like Sam,” said Iggy.

It was here that the two elves on the sofa turned and glared at Yugo. “What did you do?” they said together.

“What are you talking about?” Yugo answered innocently.

“I’m talking about this!” shouted Iggy, waving his chunky arm.

“And this,” said Iggy waving his slender arm.

Yugo shrugged. “You’re waving your arms at me?”

“This is not my arm!” Iggy said, a little more loudly.

“This is not my arm either!” shouted Iggy, rather more loudly than Iggy had.

“Tcht,” tchted Yugo. “You’re just a little disoriented from the personality transference. Take a deep breath. Have some tea.” He rose and walked over to the counter.

“I don’t like tea,” said Iggy.

Yugo turned. “You love tea,” he said.

“Can’t stand it,” said Iggy.

“I wouldn’t mind some,” said Iggy.

Yugo shook his head. “You hate tea,” he said.

“No I don’t, I love it,” said Iggy.

“I’m the one who hates tea,” said Iggy. “I’ll have a root beer, though.”

“Now I’m getting disoriented,” said Yugo.

“You’re not the only one,” replied Iggy. He stood up, took a step and stopped. The ceiling seemed a little bit higher than he remembered. For that matter, so did the floor. It seemed a lot closer than he was used to. He took another step. His legs felt heavy and slow.

“This is not right,” said Iggy, who was still sitting on the sofa, staring at his widely spread fingers. “I think I really need that root beer.”

Iggy shuffled to the washroom. Usually he moved with a spring and perhaps even a little dance in his step, but his feet felt thick and clumsy. He stepped up to the sink and splashed some water on his face. He towelled his cheeks dry and looked in the mirror.

Then Iggy screamed.

Yugo and Iggy ran to the bathroom. “What is it?” asked Yugo.

“This!” said Iggy, pointing at his puffy face. “This is what’s the matter.”

“I’m Sam!” said Iggy.

“No you’re not, I am,” said Iggy. He pushed past Iggy and into the bathroom. Then Iggy screamed. But it wasn’t Iggy, who screamed, it just looked like him. It was Sam that screamed.

Then Iggy screamed. Then Sam screamed. Then Iggy once more.

This went on for a little while until both elves were hoarse.

“Are you finished now?” asked Yugo, tapping his pointy toed shoe.

“I think so,” said Iggy.

“Not quite,” said Iggy, who was not Iggy at all, but was actually Sam. He screamed.

“Finished?” asked Yugo.

“Yes,” said Iggy, who was really Sam.

“Good,” said Yugo.

“This is not good, not good at all,” said Iggy, who was really Sam. “Look at me. I’m Sam.”

“No you’re not,” said Yugo. “You’re Iggy.”

“But I look like Sam,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“You’re just in Sam’s body,” said Yugo. “And Sam is in your body. For now. Temporarily.”

“Temporarily?” asked Iggy, who was really Sam.

“How did this happen?” asked Sam, who was really Iggy.

“I’m not sure,” said Yugo, who was really Yugo. “But I think I have an idea. I was watching your game on the big screen. You both made killing shots at exactly the same time.” He turned to Sam, who was really Iggy, “nice head shot, by the way.”

“Thanks,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“Anyway, both of your characters in the game were killed at exactly the same time. When that happened, your souls were each released from the game, but they seem to have found their way back into the wrong bodies.”

“You said this was perfectly safe,” complained Iggy, who was really Sam.

Yugo smiled weakly. “It’s only temporary.”

“Can you fix it?” asked Sam, who was really Iggy.

“Of course,” said Yugo. “At least I am sure I can figure something out.”

“Let’s just hook up the Pii again and switch back,” said Iggy, who was really Sam.

“Yes, let’s,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," said Yugo.

"Why not?" asked Sam, who was really Iggy.

"What just happened was a complete fluke. A million to one shot," Yugo explained. "There's no guarantee that if you reproduced the event that your personalities would switch back."

"I don't care," said Iggy, who was really Sam. "I can't live in this awful body forever."

"What do you mean awful?" asked Sam, who was really Iggy. "At least I work out. I can barely breathe in this tubby body of yours."

"Who are you calling tubby?" asked Iggy, who was really Sam, in a menacing tone.

"You. I mean me," said Sam, who was really Iggy. "I mean just look at me. Your boobs are bigger than my head."

Yugo stepped between the two elves. "Why don't we hook up the Pii and see if we can switch you back then?" he suggested.

"Right," said Iggy, who was really Sam.

"Right," said Sam, who was really Iggy.

They each claimed a controller and were soon back in the dystopian future of Yugo's game. Within moments, they had killed each other in horrific fashion.

Sam blinked. "Am I still Sammy Sammy two by four?" he asked.

Iggy looked at his long fingers. "Ah crumb, I'm still the toothpick," he said.

"It didn't work," said Sam, who was really Iggy.

"Let's try again," said Iggy, who was really Sam.

For the next two hours, the two friends relentlessly shot, disintegrated and blew each other up. They threw each other from high buildings, dropped enormous weights on themselves, drowned, sliced, bayoneted and mutilated one another in dozens of brutal ways. Yet, each time, the game restored their personalities to the wrong body.

"Why isn't it working?" pleaded Iggy, who was really Sam, moments after his head had exploded like an overripe pumpkin.

"I don't know," said Yugo. "Souls are fragile things. There is a lot we don't know about them. They seem to have realigned in the wrong bodies and we can't reverse the process right now."

"What are we going to do then?" asked Sam, who was really Iggy.

“Like I said, I’m sure that this is only temporary. I expect that if we just leave well enough alone, your souls will work their way back into their proper bodies on their own. They know where they belong,” said Yugo. “But there is another problem,” he added.

“Another problem?” said Iggy, who was really Sam. He lowered his narrow head into the unfamiliar long fingers. “There is always another problem,” he said.

“I sent a Pii to Stig and Jody. Sort of an early wedding-slash-Christmas present,” said Yugo.

“Ooooh,” said Iggy, who was really Sam.

“That is a problem,” said Sam, who was really Iggy. He rubbed his eyes with his unfamiliar fat fingers. “I guess we had better get over there, then, before something bad happens.”

“You mean another bad something? Because something bad has already happened,” said Iggy, who was really Sam.

“I mean, before something really bad happens,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“Really bad? So, what do you call this then?” demanded Iggy, who was really Sam. “Only marginally bad? A little bad, but I’ve had worse? Well, let me tell you, this thing that is happening right now is really right up there in the bad department. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever had worse. And this is coming from a guy who has had it pretty bad over the years, all things considered.⁵ I know bad. I’ve been through bad. Me and bad, we go way, way back.⁶

“Let me tell you about bad. I’ve been thrown in jail, more than once. I’ve been shot at. I’ve been kidnapped by aliens. I’ve been attacked by dogs and dragons and more monsters than I can remember. I’ve been chased by pirates, and bandits and crazy people with machetes. I think that I can say that everything bad that can happen to a person has happened to me at one time or another. And this one, this is the worst of it.”

“But Sam,” said Sam, who was really Iggy. “It’s always worked out for the best.”

“Oh really,” said Iggy, who was really Sam. “And how is that?”

“We always saved Christmas in the end, didn’t we? This will all work out for the best, too. I’m sure of it,” said Sam, who was really Iggy. Iggy was, by nature, an optimist. He could see the good side in anything. He was

⁵ I don’t know why, but those last six sentences work a whole lot better if you read them out loud, and with a British accent.

⁶ Conversely, those last three sentences work best if you read them out loud with an American accent.

an optimist's optimist. For him, the glass was always half full, even when it was empty.

Iggy, who was really Sam opened his mouth to reply, but stopped. Sam, who was really Iggy had a point. All of the scrapes, bruises and close calls over the years had worked out all right in the end. Sam was the one who always had doubts about how things would work out. He was much of a glass half empty kind of guy (usually because he had drank the rest of the glass). Yet, somehow he thought that maybe this time things would work out. He shook his head. There must be something inside this strange skinny body that was rubbing off on him.

"All right," said Iggy, who was really Sam. "Let's go sort out this mess."

Sam, who was really Iggy smiled. Iggy, who was really Sam turned and pointed at Yugo. "And you had better be right. This had better be temporary."

PIE TENNINATE LOOKED SADLY INTO THE CAMERA and softly said, "It's all over. We're not going to make it." He squeezed his eyes to hold back the tears. Then he whispered, "cut."

The cameraman lowered the heavy handheld camera and the crew burst into laughter. Pie joined in.

"That was great," said the cameraman. "I really believed you."

Pie chuckled. In the second half of every episode of *Really Extremely Made Over Homes*, Pie solemnly announced that despite all of their best efforts, they were simply not going to make it. There were too many problems and not enough time to finish the job. Yet, in the end, the crew somehow rallied to complete the project, just as the excited homeowners arrived at the scene.

In fact, the construction schedule for each really extremely made over home was detailed down to the minute. There was never any question that the massive renovations would be completed on time and on budget. However, the execution of perfect project management is scarcely great television, so each week Pie would invent some false drama to make it appear that maybe, just maybe, this time the team was in over their heads and would fail to really extremely make over a home, despite the best and most heroic efforts to do so.

In this case, while Pie was overseeing the placement of a marble pillar in the front entranceway, he chanced to spot a termite running across the floor. Construction was halted while the workers searched the house until Pie himself discovered a termite nest under the old kitchen

floorboards. He peeled back the half devoured floor, which crumbled to dust in his hands. Anyone could see that the damage was severe and would require much more work than expected. And so Pie somberly turned to the camera and said, "It's all over. We're not going to make it."

With that shot in the can, the insect handler Pie had hired to set up the termite nest rushed onto the set and carefully removed each termite from the site. Another workman removed the prop floorboards that had apparently been damaged by the infestation and the crew returned to work.

Pie cackled with delight. Great television did not get any more real than this.

A young woman with long blond hair pulled back in a ponytail and a clipboard in one hand walked over to Pie. She passed him a large Styrofoam cup filled with a double half caf with foam. This was an important job. Without regular intake of double half cap with foam, Pie became so loud that he sometimes damaged the sound equipment. Pie slurped noisily and passed the cup back. He raised the bullhorn and asked her, "what's next!"

The production assistant flinched at Pie's unnecessarily loud question and replied, "there are three gentlemen here and they insist on speaking to whoever is in charge."

"Safety inspectors?" Pie bellowed into the bullhorn. The arrival of safety inspectors was never a good thing, though occasionally the editing room could turn it into an interesting scene.

She shook her head. "Elves, I think," she said.

Pie lowered his bullhorn. "Elves?" he said.

The production assistant nodded. Pie took the clipboard from her hands and flipped through the pages. He raised his bullhorn once more. "We don't have any scenes calling for elves and there are no elves on the call sheet. Get rid of them."

"They say it's important," she said.

"Are they in the union?" asked Pie. The last thing he needed was union trouble.

"I don't think so," she said.

"I'll take care of it." He pushed the clipboard into her hands and marched away. He waved to his cameraman to join him. Pie usually avoided unscripted moments on his show, but every once in a while, somebody improvised something worthwhile. He would hate to miss it if it happened. The cameraman followed diligently.

Pie walked out the front door, which was made of eucalyptus and inlaid with carved ebony panels. It no longer hung from the hinges with string. At the end of the front walk, which was now a winding cobblestone path, stood three small men in front of a gleaming red snowmobile. They each wore red and green velvet suits, with pointed caps and pointed toed boots.

The shortest and fattest of the little men took a step toward him and extended his hand. "Good morning," he said. "My name is Iggy." He gestured to one of his companions, a sturdy fellow with an enormous moustache. "This is Yugo." The sturdy elf bowed slightly. "And this is Sam," he pointed to a tall slender elf with a long face which sported a long thin nose and unruly black hair. The tall elf crossed his arms and shifted his feet uncomfortably.

Pie raised his bullhorn, "fine, nice to meet you," he hollered. "This is a closed set, you have to leave now."

"We're looking for some friends of ours," said Iggy.

"They live here," said Yugo.

"They are probably in terrible trouble by now," said Sam. He glared at Yugo with his narrow dark eyes.

"They're gone. Come back next week," Pie shouted into his bullhorn.

"It's awfully urgent we find them," pressed Iggy.

"Go away," yelled Pie.

Yugo covered his ears. "Is that really necessary?" he asked.

"Yes," shouted Pie. "Now unless you're with the union, you better get out of here."

Sam's eyes sparkled. "We are with the union," he said. Iggy and Yugo stared at him with their mouths open. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of string, a toy soldier and a card. "Toybuilders, Woodcrafters and Modelmakers, Local 1," he said.

Pie took the card from Sam, stared at it for a moment and then threw it back at him. "Toybuilders? Modelmakers? That's not the union I'm talking about! What kind of union is that?" he bellowed into his megaphone.

"We're elves," said Iggy helpfully. "It's an elf union."

"I don't care what kind of elves or dwarves or gnomes you are," hollered Pie. "Get off my set before I call the cops!"

"Can you just tell us where they are," Yugo pleaded.

"No! That's confidential!" Pie yelled. His bullhorn hissed.

“Listen bud,” said Sam, stabbing his long finger into Pie’s thigh. “Our friends are in danger. If we don’t find them immediately, something bad might happen. I mean really bad. And I know bad from way back. You don’t want to get me started about how bad this is.”

“Get out of here!” shrieked Pie.

“Come on Sam,” said Yugo, tugging on his neatly pressed sleeve. “This guy is no help. We’ll find them on our own somehow.” He pressed a black button on his key fob and the doors of the snowmobile slid upwards on silent hydraulics.

“You better hope they’re okay,” said Sam.

“You better get off my set. Now!” screamed Pie so loudly that droplets of spit sprayed out from the end of the bullhorn.

Sam wiped his face with his sleeve and joined Iggy and Yugo in the snowmobile. Yugo pressed an orange button and the snowmobile’s twin lithium fusion engines growled gently to life. He turned and drove down the block.

Pie lowered his bullhorn and leaned into the cameraman. “Did you get all that?” he asked.

STIG SET DOWN THE CONTROLLER AND LEANED BACK in his chair. “Well, this is weird,” he said in his high feminine voice.

“Yes, it is,” replied Jody. She ran her fingers through her short dark hair. “But something weird always seems to happen to us at Christmas time.”

“It certainly does,” agreed Stig, flipping his long wavy brown hair out of his eyes.

“I have to say that this is weirder than I expected,” said Jody. “I was expecting something more along the lines of aliens or zombies.”

“Me too,” said Stig. “This is much weirder than that.” He was surprised at how calm he was about this development. Jody, too. After two Christmases in a row that were totally weird, it appeared that they were both ready to accept anything without comment or complaint, no matter how strange it might be.

“Definitely,” said Jody.

“Indeed,” said Stig.

“Yes,” said Jody.

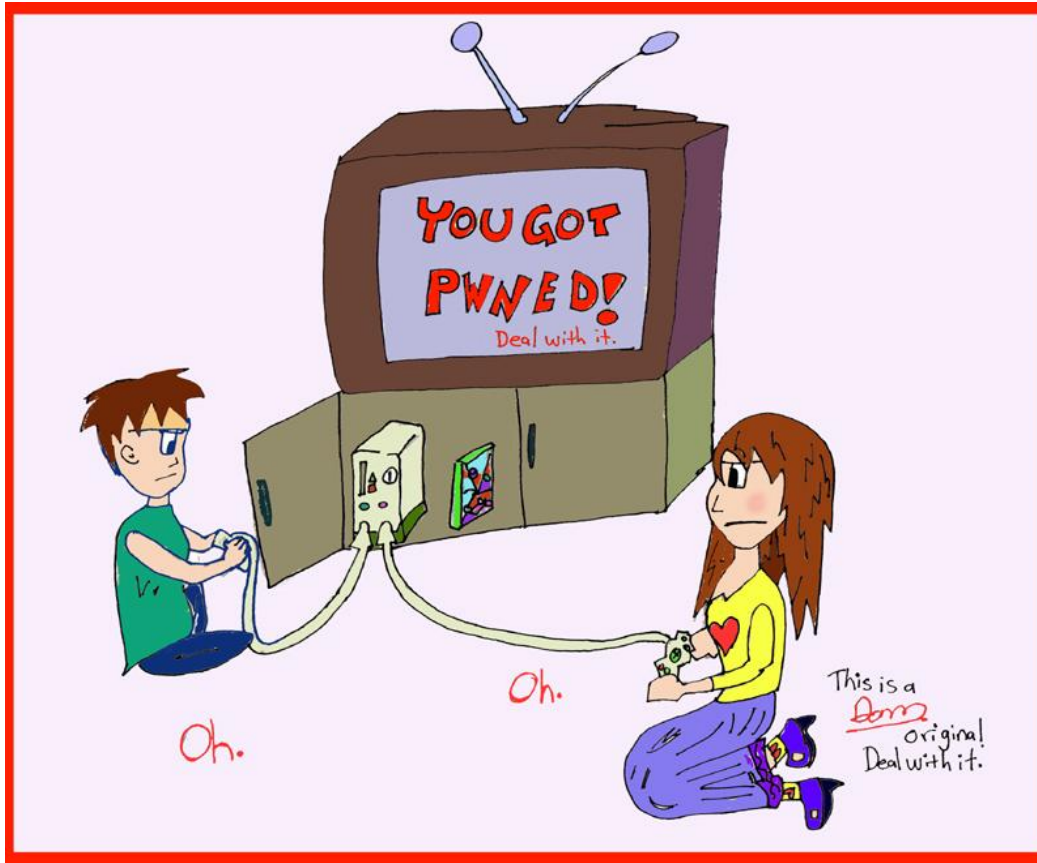
“Yes,” said Stig.

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”



They were both quiet for a few moments, and then Jody spoke again in her deep voice. “This is going to be a problem, you know, what with the wedding and all.”

Stig nodded.

“It’s only three days away,” she said gruffly.

“I know,” said Stig. His eyes sparkled beneath his long lashes.

“And my sister is having a shower for me tonight,” she said. “Everyone will be there. Even your mother is coming.”

Stig winced. He knew what she was going to say next.

“You are going to have to go, you know,” which was exactly what he had expected her to say.

“I suppose I am,” he said. He was, after all, her. And she was him. Just as Iggy and Sam had switched identities while playing with the Pii, so had Stig and Jody. They had spent a couple of exciting hours together exploring the apocalyptic world of Yugo’s game hand in hand when Jody had stepped on a landmine. The resulting explosion had sent them both out of the game together, and into one another.

“It’s your stag tonight, isn’t it,” said Stig, who was really Jody calmly. Then she burped unexpectedly.

“I’m afraid so,” said Jody, who was really Stig.

“I imagine that I will have to go in your place then, also” she said, dreading the idea. She felt an ache deep inside her hairy chest.

“I imagine so,” he said, dreading the idea even more as soon as his soft red lips had formed the words. He got up from the chair and walked into the bathroom. The minutes passed slowly before Stig, who was really Jody heard the toilet flush and Jody, who was really Stig, walked back into the room. “This is going to take a little getting used to,” he said.

Stig, who was really Jody burped again. “It certainly will,” she said.

“**W**E NEED A PLAN,” said Yugo as he steered the snowmobile through the streets of New Bedlam. People on the sidewalks stared at the strange bright red vehicle as it swept past them, floating silently a few inches off of the ground.

Yugo’s snowmobile is unlike any other snowmobile in the entire world. Indeed, it is unlike anything *else* in the entire world. It has a small passenger cabin with room for four passengers (or as many as six, if those passengers happen to be elves). It easily travels across snow or ice, and, with the flip of a yellow switch or the turn of a blue knob, it can travel just as easily through sea or air. It can fly at supersonic speed, it can travel through space and time. It truly is remarkable. You really ought to see it sometime.

Yugo pulled up to a drive in window. “We also need some lunch,” he said. “What are you guys having? I’m buying.”

Sam, who was really Iggy set his hands on his large belly. It was rumbling slightly. “Maybe a small salad,” he said. “I’m not really hungry.”

“I’ll have a triple burger, large fries and a banana-cherry milk shake,” said Iggy, who was really Sam. He looked down at his narrow waist. “Better make that two triple burgers,” he added.

Yugo collected the order and then drove to the other side of the lot. Iggy, who was really Sam, tore the foil wrapper off of his first triple burger and took a big bite out of it. “Oh, that is good,” he said.

“What do you think you are doing?” asked Sam, who was really Iggy.

“Having lunch?” replied Iggy, who was really Sam.

“You can’t eat that crap!” Sam, who was really Iggy, exclaimed. “I’m a vegetarian!”

Iggy, who was really Sam took another bite of triple burger. “But I’m not,” he said, between chews. A chunk of triple burger fell from his lip.

“You are now,” said Sam, who was really Iggy, and he pushed a large lettuce leaf into his mouth.

“Ew,” said Iggy, who was really Sam. “You know I don’t like vegetables. They give me wind.”

Sam, who was really Iggy began gnawing on a celery stick. “Yum, yum,” he said.

“Oh yeah,” said Iggy, who was really Sam, and he stuffed all of his remaining triple burger into his mouth. “Tyahk dad!” he slurred.

“Will you two knock it off,” said Yugo. “We don’t have time for this. We need a plan.”

“What do you have in mind?” asked Sam, who was really Iggy. Iggy, who was really Sam just grunted and continued chewing his triple burger.

“I think we will find them faster if we split up,” said Yugo. “Iggy, why don’t you go to Jody’s sister’s house and see if she knows where they are.”

“Rhonda?” said Sam, who was really Iggy. “I don’t think she likes me.”

“She doesn’t like anyone,” said Yugo. “Sam, you go to that comic book store Stig likes. All his friends hang out there. One of them must know where he is.” Iggy, who was really Sam grunted again. With a great final effort he forced the last chunk of triple burger down. He followed that with a loud oniony burp.

“What about you?” asked Sam, who was really Iggy.

“I’m going to see someone who might be able to help,” said Yugo. He started up the snowmobile. “It’s getting dark. Let’s go.”

SAM, WHO WAS REALLY IGGY had a bad feeling in his large, and still unfamiliar, belly the moment he rang the doorbell. The door was decorated with pink streamers, pink ribbons and pink balloons. From the other side of the door he could hear giggling and squeals of laughter. It sounded like some sort of a party was going on. It sounded like some sort of party to which Sam, who was really Iggy, would not have been invited.⁷

He waited a respectable minute or so. There was no answer. Whoops of laughter pealed from beyond the door. Sam, who was really Iggy swallowed hard and pressed the doorbell again. The laughter stopped and Sam, who was really Iggy, heard the sound of high heels clattering across the floor.

The door swung open. Jody's sister Rhonda was a tall woman, made even taller by a pair of bright pink four inch heels. She wore a large pair of white plastic rimmed glasses, which matched a large pair of white plastic hoop earrings. Her short hair stood up in rows of pointed spikes.

Rhonda glared down at him. "Oh, it's you. You're one of those goblins, aren't you?"

"Elves, actually," corrected Sam, who was really Iggy.

"Whatever," said Rhonda. "I'm very busy right now, and I gave to the Christmas Fund already this year."

"I'm not collecting for any charity," said Sam, who was really Iggy. "I'm looking for Jody. It is very important that I find her. Do you know where she is."

Rhonda laughed. "She's all tied up at the moment. Come back later. Better yet, come back next week." She started to close the door.

"This is going to hurt," thought Sam, who was really Iggy. He extended his pointy-toed boot into the doorway. The door closed on it with a crushing crunching sound. He was right, it did hurt. It hurt a lot. Rhonda was leaning on the door now and Sam, who was really Iggy felt as though his toes might burst. He wondered how he would explain that to Sam. It was, after all, Sam's foot that was being crushed. He leaned forward and pushed back on the door.

He was surprised when it budged under his weight. Then again, he was not used to putting Sam's considerable mass behind anything. He

⁷ Sam, who was really Iggy, would never have been invited, because the party going on on the other side of the door was a bridal 'shower.' A shower is a ladies only affair to which neither men nor elves are ever invited. It is called a 'shower', not because there is any bathing going on (guests are expected to have already cleaned up before their arrival), but because the bride-to-be is 'showered' with gifts. Many showers of the bathing variety are more fun than showers of the bridal variety.

wiggled his foot free. He heard Rhonda grunt on the other side of the door. She pushed harder, but when Sam, who was really Iggy, leaned into the door it opened with surprising ease.

He stumbled through the suddenly open door and into the foyer. Rhonda staggered backwards into a brown furry lump on the floor and then stumbled to the ground. The brown furry lump was an enormous Airedale named Fredda. She looked up languidly from her place on the floor and licked Rhonda's cheek.

A severe looking woman rushed across the room. Sam, who was really Iggy shivered a little at her approach.

"Oh my dear, are you all right?" asked the severe looking woman. She was wearing a dark brown suit with the shoulder pads of a linebacker. Her purple hair was swept up into an ocean of purple waves.

Rhonda got up on one knee. "I'm fine, thanks," she said.

The severe looking woman hurried past Rhonda and stroked Fredda gently under the chin. "Is Mummy's little pookums okay? Did the bad lady hurt 'ums?" she cooed.

Fredda blinked her watery brown eyes. Rhonda just shook her head.

"Good evening Mrs. Hawkins," said Sam, who was really Iggy. He took off his cap and bowed slightly. The severe looking woman looked straight at him, then turned back to Fredda without acknowledging him at all. Stig's mother had very poor people skills. Her elf skills were even worse.

Sam, who was really Iggy, stepped past Mrs. Hawkins, Fredda and Rhonda and into the front room. There were perhaps a dozen women seated in chairs arranged in a large oval. At the far end of the room he saw Jody seated in a big leather easy chair. She was wearing a bikini made out of ribbons and bows over her clothes. She wore a matching hat, with ribbons that tumbled down and wove through the curls of her thick brown hair. He immediately started looking for an exit.

He was too late. Already, Jody was waving and calling out to him. "Sam, Sam, over here," as though she was not the most obvious person in the room.

Sam, who was really Iggy, shrugged and made his way across the room. He sat down beside Jody. She leaned over and whispered to him urgently. "Sam, you have to get me out of here. These women are insane."

"I'm not Sam, I'm Iggy," Sam, who was really Iggy, whispered back.

Jody looked at him, blinked a few times and said, "quit screwing around Sam, this is serious. I don't know how much more of this I can take. I look ridiculous."

Sam, who was really Iggy, whispered, more urgently this time, "I'm not screwing around. I'm really Iggy. There was an ... accident."

Jody whispered even more urgently, "you had an accident? You're really Iggy? I had an accident, too. I'm Stig."

"Oh no, we're too late," whispered Sam, who was really Iggy.

Jody, who was really Stig, grabbed Sam, who was really Iggy, by the front of his tunic. He whispered loudly, "Iggy, you have to get me out of here. I've been here for three hours and the only thing they have to drink is tea."

"Sounds lovely," said Sam, who was really Iggy. "I wouldn't mind some tea."

"We aren't staying," said Jody, who was really Stig. "These woman are crazy. Every time I open a present, they dress me in the wrappings. And every present is Tupperware™. Who needs this much Tupperware™?" He waved his delicate arm towards a heap of utilitarian molded plastic containers.

"Tupperware™ is a fine product, you know," said Sam, who was really Iggy. He looked around for the teapot.

"We spent the first twenty minutes looking at this." Jody, who was really Stig, waved his left hand, with the engagement ring Stig had given Jody sparkling on the third finger. "It's like it has its own gravitational field or something."

Sam, who was really Iggy peered at Jody's ring. "Seems far too small to have a gravitational field," he said.

Jody, who was really Stig, glared at the rotund elf.

"And the games," continued Jody, who was really Stig. "You wouldn't believe how lame these games are. We played something called 'Guess The Spice'. There were all these unmarked jars of spices, and you had to try and guess what they are. And do you know what the winner got?"

Sam, who was really Iggy shrugged. "A spice rack?"

Jody, who was really Stig, glared at him. "I always thought when chicks got together they had pillow fights and practiced French kissing with each other. That wouldn't be so bad. But this, this is awful!" By now, he was not so much whispering as he was shouting.

All of the women at Jody's shower stopped talking and stared at him.

Sam, who was really Iggy, smiled feebly and said, "anyone up for another round of 'Guess The Spice'?"

"Take a knee," Jody who was really Stig hissed.

"What?" said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“Fake an injury. So we can get out of here.”

“I can’t just pretend I’m hurt,” said Sam, who was really Iggy. “That would be rude.”

Jody, who was really Stig, stomped down hard on Sam’s foot, impaling it with his spiked heel.

“Ow!” hollered Sam, who was really Iggy. Jody, who was really Stig, had stepped on his good foot. He pressed down until his heel reached the floor.

“That really hurts,” whimpered Sam, who was really Iggy. Jody, who was really Stig, pulled his heel out of the elf’s foot. Blood dripped from the end of it.

“Sorry, Sam, I’m still not used to these things.”

“It’s Iggy,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“Right. Sorry Iggy,” said Jody, who was really Stig. He wrapped his arm around Sam’s shoulders and said, “I’m afraid my friend needs urgent medical attention,” he said. Sam, who was really Iggy, wiped a tear from his eye.

“I’m just going to take him to see a doctor. Before it gets any worse. We wouldn’t want it to become gangrenous, would we?” He helped Sam, who was really Iggy, to his feet and they worked their way across the room. Jody, who was really Stig, wavered awkwardly in his high heels. Sam, who was really Iggy, left a trail of bloody footprints on the carpet.

Jody, who was really Stig called back over his shoulder. “I had a lovely time,” he lied. “Sorry to leave in such a rush,” he lied again. Then he guided Sam, who was really Iggy, through the front door and out of the house.

The ladies who were left behind stood and watched them through the front window as they walked away. “What deplorable behaviour,” sniffed Mrs. Hawkins. “That girl was simply not raised properly. Her mother must be so embarrassed.

Jody’s mother coughed and said, “I’m standing right beside you.”

“I know,” said Mrs. Hawkins.

AMAZING MAN SLIPPED THROUGH THE SECRET DOOR that led into his basement hideout. It had been a quiet night in the city. He'd tackled a mugger and chased off a couple of looters, but that was it. He would leave it up to the police to take care of things, now. He had a pressing commitment and he was already late.

He took off his helmet and goggles and set them on a shelf. He untied his red pleather cape and removed it with a flourish. He placed it gently on a hook. He was removing his red gloves when he heard a gentle tapping on the window.

He started, and looked up. The basement window was made of one way reflective glass. He could see the elf on the other side of the pane, but there was no way the elf could see him. At least he should not be able to see him. But, the elf was wearing a most peculiar pair of sunglasses and was staring right at him. He grabbed his housecoat from the back of his chair and pulled it on over his uniform.

The elf knocked on the windowpane again. Amazing Man, now dressed as passably polite comic shop owner Alert Darr, walked over to the window and slid it open.

Yugo pulled the goggles from his head and climbed inside. "I've been looking everywhere for you," he said. He passed the goggles to Alert. "X-ray goggles. You might be able to make some use of these."

Alert reached for the glasses and his housecoat fell open, revealing the orange and red spandex uniform with the stylized letter **A** on the chest. He moved to hide the emblem, but Yugo waved him off.

"Don't worry about it, I haven't told anybody yet, I'm not about to start," he said.

"You knew?" said Alert. "But how ... ?"

Yugo smiled. "I just put a few things together. I'm fairly clever, you know. For an elf."

Alert set the glasses on the shelf. He had to agree that a pair of x-ray glasses could be pretty useful.

"Here's a few other things I put together that you might find helpful." Yugo reached into his tool belt and passed Alert a series of strange objects, describing each one in turn. "Booterang ... throw this boot properly and it will come back to you ... quite stylish, also. Invisibility perfume ... spray this on and you'll be completely odorless ... handy if you're ever chased by dogs or after a big workout. Bullet-proof earmuffs ... I guess that's pretty self explanatory. An octostar ... that's an eight pointed ninja star ... which is 60 percent pointier than the five pointed

kind. Stop watch ... just press this button here and it will stop time for a few minutes.

“And finally, the spaghetti gun ... shoots a stream of pasta up to a hundred metres.” Yugo paused, “actually, that one might not be as useful as some of the others.”

Alert turned the large silver pistol in his hand, taking care not to press the trigger. It would not do to spray noodles all over the room. “I don’t know how to thank you, Yugo,” he said.

“Think nothing of it,” said Yugo. “It’s Christmas. But I do need your help.”

“Anything,” said Alert.

“I need to find Stig and Jody, it’s very important.”

Alert laughed. “That’s easy. I was just going to meet him. His stag is tonight. I’m sure he’d be delighted if you came along.”

“Stig’s stag?⁸” said Yugo. He’d never been to a stag before and was somewhat wary of this invitation. He understood that a stag typically involved hard drink and easy women, two things that were not among his many strengths.

“Yeah, it’s tonight. I’m already late.”

“No hurry,” said Yugo.

Alert grinned. “First stag?” he asked.

Yugo nodded.

“Don’t worry,” said Alert. “We’ll take good care of you.”

“**W**HERE ARE WE GOING?” asked Sam, who was really Iggy. He was running to keep up with Jody, who was really Stig.

“We are going to find Jody. I mean me. So you guys can fix up this mess,” said Jody, who was really Stig.

“Slow down, will you,” pleaded Sam, who was really Iggy. “I’m carrying a few more pounds than I’m used to. This body can’t move very fast. And besides, my feet are killing me.”

“We can’t slow down, we’re already late,” said Jody who was really Stig. “They might have left by now.”

⁸ Trying saying that ten times fast. Just try it.

“Who might have left?”

“Stig. I mean Jody. With all of Stig’s idiot friends. I mean my idiot friends,” said Jody who was really Stig.

“Left where?”

“Stig’s stag. My stag,” said Jody who was really Stig. “It’s tonight. And if we hurry we might still catch up with them.”

“How do you move so fast in those shoes?” asked Sam, who was really Iggy.

Jody, who was really Stig, stopped and stared down at his bright pink high heeled shoes. “I think I am getting used to these shoes,” he said. “In fact, I really like them.” He extended his leg and wiggled his foot. “I wonder if these come in a size 14?”

Sam, who was really Iggy blinked and opened his mouth to reply. Then he just closed it again. Words utterly failed him.

“Come on, we’re almost there,” said Jody, who was really Stig. His high heels clattered like a drum roll on the sidewalk.

Sam, who was really Iggy, took a deep breath and shuffled after him. “Almost where?” he asked.

“The *Laughing Ninja*,” said Jody, who was really Stig.

“Your stag is being held at a comic book shop?” asked Sam, who was really Iggy. “Who holds a stag at a comic book shop?”

Jody, who was really Stig shrugged his narrow shoulders. “My friend Lance organized it. He’s an idiot.”

“I thought they were all idiots?” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“He’s the biggest idiot of the lot,” said Jody, who was really Stig. “He means well, but he just doesn’t have a clue.”

“I thought he was a lawyer. Aren’t lawyers supposed to be smart?” asked Sam, who was really Iggy.

“Not this one,” said Jody, who was really Stig. “He’s so clueless he thinks his farts don’t smell.”

“Do they?”

“Big time,” said Jody, who was really Stig. “But, he’s a good guy. He’s helping me sue my insurance company.”

“How’s that going?”

“Slowly,” replied Jody, who was really Stig. “But he’s working really hard at it, judging from the size of his bills. Here we are.” He stopped in front of a large display window. On the other side of the glass, elderly first

editions of *Bulletman*, *Floyd Reaver – Neighbourhood Spy* and *Captain Justice* were flanked by porcelain statues of modern superheroes, like Dr. Bug and Ectopossum. Jody, who was really Stig, stared dumbly through the window. A thin thread of drool escaped from his pouty red lips.

Sam, who was really Iggy, was looking at Jody, who was really Stig, in a bemused manner when Yugo appeared beside him.

“What are you staring at, in such a bemused manner?” asked Yugo.

Sam, who was really Iggy, jumped a little and blinked at his friend. “What are you doing here?”

Yugo motioned to Alert Darr, who was standing beside him in outdated brown suit. “The same thing you are. We’re looking for Stig.”

“He’s over there,” said Sam, who was really Iggy, waving in the direction of Jody, who was really Stig.

“That’s Jody,” said Alert.

“Not really,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“Oh dear,” said Yugo. “Are we too late?”

Sam, who was really Iggy, nodded.

“Then it is even more important that we catch up with Stig,” said Yugo.

“You mean Jody,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“Right,” said Yugo.

“Let’s go then,” said Sam, who was really Iggy. He pulled open the door to the *Laughing Ninja*.

“Who has a stag at a comic shop?” whispered Yugo.

“A bunch of idiots, apparently,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

Yugo nodded. The two elves stepped inside. Laser beam sound effects echoed throughout the shop the moment their tiny feet landed on the doormat. Yugo cringed, but there was nobody near him except for life size cardboard cut-outs of Chewbacca and Power Girl.

They made their way down a narrow aisle, looking for any sign of Stig or Jody or any of these idiot friends that Jody or Stig kept complaining about. The aisle was lined with tall book shelves, filled with comic books; each cover featuring characters with bigger muscles than Mr. Universe or larger bosoms than Miss January. At the end of the aisle, a young man in a yellow polo shirt was dusting some of the older titles. He looked up as the elves approached.

“Good evening,” said the earnest young man. “Can I help you?”

Sam, who was really Iggy looked at the nametag pinned to the young man's yellow shirt. "Ronnie?" he said.

"That's me," said Ronnie. "How can I help you?"

"We're looking for Jody ... I mean Stig," said Yugo.

"And some idiots," added Sam, who was really Iggy.

"Oh yes," said Ronnie. "They were here. But they left."

"Where did they go?" asked Yugo.

"I don't know," said Ronnie. "A couple of them wanted to head to the *Howling Coyote* in the Old Quarter. But the others wanted to go to *Basil's Tavern*. They were still arguing about it when they left here an hour ago."

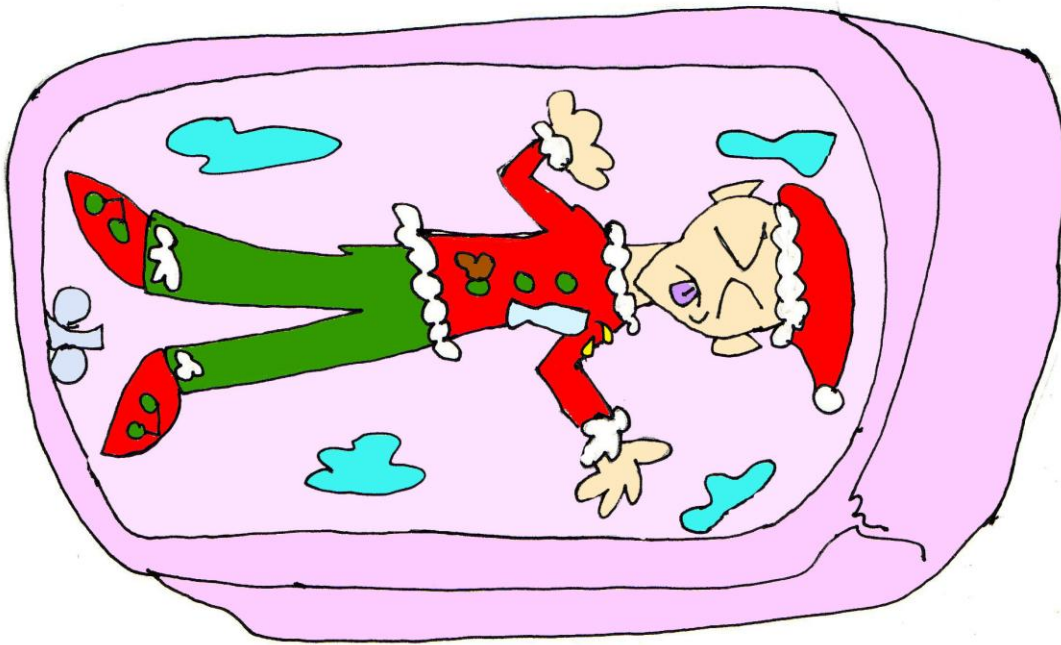
Sam, who was really Iggy and Yugo looked at each other. "What do you think?" asked Yugo. "Where should we go?"

If you think Iggy and Yugo should go to the *Howling Coyote* in the Old Quarter, go to page 57.

If you think Iggy and Yugo should go to *Basil's Tavern*, go to page 68.

LGGY, WHO WAS REALLY SAM, OPENED HIS EYES HALFWAY. It took all of his strength to open them even that far. He closed them again, that was easier. His head ached terribly. His feet hurt. Each time his heart pumped, it hurt worse. Still, he reckoned, as long as his heart was pumping, he was probably alive. He was not certain whether he was happy or unhappy with that reckoning.

He lay on his back on ... something ... somewhere. He struggled to remember. Slowly the events of the night before came back to him. Images at first, then stray words. He tried to organize it all in his mind, but the strain of that was overwhelming. He decided that he would sleep a little and try it again in a while.



HE WOKE AGAIN SOME TIME LATER. His eyelids still hurt and his mouth tasted like the elephant house at the zoo. His face was pressed against something smooth and cool. He slowly opened one eye. White porcelain. He realized that he was in a bathtub. It was never a good thing to wake up in a bathtub. He closed his eye again. Memories of last night flashed through his mind like a slide show, with all of the slides out of order and some of them upside down.

He tried to concentrate, which sent rivers of pain flowing through his brain. Was it his brain? he wondered. He realized that it was not his

brain at all, it was Iggy's brain that hurt so much. That made him feel a little better.

He remembered that Yugo told him to go to the *Laughing Ninja* to find Stig. Stig was usually there on Saturday night, Yugo said. And when he got there, he found Stig.

Except it was not Stig. It was someone else. And there were other people there. Stig's friends; they were idiots really, but they were all very nice. They all bought him drinks.

Ah, that was it. There were drinks. Many, many drinks. Iggy, who was really Sam, tried to calculate how many, many drinks there had been, but he needed a slide rule to do the math. It was many, many, many, many drinks. He was sure that the drinks numbered fewer than a hundred, but he could not confidently say that they numbered less than ninety.

The *Laughing Ninja* comic shop: that was where it started. He was sure of that much. And it had ended in this bathtub. His face was pressed against the porcelain. The bath ring tasted a little sour and he pulled his tongue back into his mouth, though not without some difficulty. The parts between the comic shop and the bath tub were still a little foggy, but he knew it had begun at the *Laughing Ninja*.

Iggy and Yugo dropped him off a little after 7:00 PM. He walked through the front doors, setting off the laser beam sound effects and worked his way to the back of the store. That was where he found Stig's friends. They were all idiots.

There was Lance, the lawyer. He was dressed in a dark three piece suit and a bright red tie. He wore cufflinks with his neatly pressed white shirt and had a haircut that looked dreadfully expensive. His teeth were perfectly straight. Lance spoke with a lot of big words. Once in a while he dropped a Latin phrase into the conversation. *Alius rotundus imbibo, commodo*. Another round of drinks, please. That was a useful Latin phrase. Iggy, who was really Sam, would have to remember that one.

Rudy. Rudy was 43 years old and still lived in his mother's basement. He was skinny and had long hair that was drawn back into a pony tail. He wore small wire framed glasses and had the beginnings of a beard. He was working on his thesis. Or his novel. Or an article about somebody famous. Something like that, it was hard to be sure anymore. At one point in the evening he remembered believing it was the most important work that had yet been worked. But he could not for the life of him remember what it was now.

Herschel. The short one. He was stocky, with a bit of a hump and dark curly hair that was thinning at the top. Although he was shorter than the others, he was still taller than Iggy, who was really Sam. He wore a

dark brown hooded cloak and occasionally spoke in a guttural language of his own invention. *Issht-ehn şpøøkklēghhġg daġār, exp blööm*. Another round of drinks, please. He would have to remember that one, also.

And lastly, Grampa Les. The old one. No, not the old one: the ancient one. He was related to Jody somehow, but he might have been more closely related to Adam and Eve. His papery skin was a shade of greyish greenish yellow (or “grelow”) that Iggy, who was really Sam, had never seen anywhere else. The patches that weren’t grellow were covered in big round spots that seemed to expand while you looked at them. He still had some hair on his head, though the hair that grew from his ears and the moles on his cheeks was both longer and thicker. He was grizzled, yes that was it: grizzled. He chattered away in a dialect that only the truly grizzled can. *Anudder whikkee an be mekkin’ id snippity*. Another whiskey, please. That was one he would not forget anytime soon.

The four of them were crowded about a small round table, rolling multi-sided dice and moving small metal figures around a highly detailed map when Iggy, who was really Sam, arrived. “I’m looking for Stig,” he said. “pull up a chair,” said they, “he will be here momentarily.” “Can we pour you something to drink?” one of them inquired. “Yes, I rather think you might,” he replied, and from there things started slowly rolling downhill.

By the time Stig arrived Iggy, who was really Sam, was finishing off his third gutnumber⁹ and his gut was, well, numb. He remembered that there was something he was supposed to say to Stig when he saw him, but he could not remember what. He was sure it would come back to him. In the meantime, he picked up another gutnumber.

Lance stood up and shook Stig’s hand. “Finally, the happy groom arrives,” he said. “What can we get you to drink?”

Stig put one hand on his hip and tapped his chin with the fingers of the other. “Do you have any white wine?” he asked.

The rest of Stig’s friends stopped playing their game and stared at him. A single multi sided die clattered across the board, unnoticed.

“Oh, silly me, what was I thinking?” said Stig. He batted his eyelashes. “I’ll try a beer. Do you have any of those? I’ve never had one before.”

Nobody reached for the die on the table.

“I mean I’ve never had one before today,” said Stig. Herschel nodded and collected the die. Stig collected his glass and took a careful sip. He giggled. “The bubbles tickle,” he said.

⁹ The gutnumber is a cocktail which was invented by insane bartender Walter Mogle in July, 1977. It is made by combining equal parts of rye, bourbon, rum and scotch, shaking over ice and then adding a dollop of crème de menthe. It looks, and tastes, a little like boogers.

Iggy, who was really Sam, walked over to Stig and clinked his glass. "Remind me that there is something I am supposed to tell you," he said.

"There's something I need to tell you," said Stig. He leaned forward and whispered. "I'm not Stig at all. I'm Jody."

Iggy, who was really Sam, laughed and tapped their glasses together again. "That's great, that's just great," he slurred.

"Iggy, listen to me, we're not ourselves. You have to help us," said Stig, who was really Jody.

"That's a good idea," said Sam, who was really Iggy. "I think I will help myself to another." He drained his cup and motioned to Lance to pour him a fresh drink.

"Iggy ... " said Stig, who was really Jody.

Iggy, who was really Sam, shook his head. "I'm not Iggy," he said. "I'm Sam."

"Don't be silly Iggy," said Stig, who was really Jody, "this is important. I'm really a woman."

"I think it is important that you've gotten in touch with your feminine side," said Iggy, who was really Sam. He nodded seriously. "Especially with your wedding coming up."

"I'm not in touch with my feminine side," said Stig, who was really Jody. He gritted his teeth. "All I have is a feminine side. I am a woman trapped in a man's body."

"I hear that there is an operation for that," said Iggy, who was really Sam. It occurred to him now, in the oh so very, very brilliant light of the morning that perhaps Stig, who he now realized was really Jody, had been trying to tell him something important.

She gestured at Stig's torso. "It's horrible. I'm covered with hair. I keep scratching my ... my parts ... without meaning to. I fart all the time. You have to get me out of here!"

"You're right," said Iggy, who was really Sam. "We should get out of here." He called out to the others. "Hey you guys, let's get this party moving!"

Grampa Les took a long pull from a beer mug filled with whiskey. "Ram bottom rickety sneakers Howard Johnson!" he cursed. "It be aboutten tim we be gettin' aboutten outten here. This ain't bein' no properly place fer no properly drinkin' no madder how wheezin'."

Lance set down his tumbler. "Grampa Les speaks credibly," he said, with perfect elocution. "Now that Stig is finally amongst us herein, we must needs repair post haste to a more appropriate venue, at which, and

without further delay or ado, we may thereafter continue our ribald revelry, *ipso facto*.”

“Does he always talk like that?” Iggy, who was really Sam, whispered to Stig, who was really Jody.

“Yes,” she said. “I think they learn it at law school.”

Iggy, who was really Sam, nodded. There followed a discussion about where they should go next. Lance and Rudy both wanted to go to *Basil’s Tavern*. Grampa Les and Herschel wanted to go to the *Howling Coyote*.

“It be amatcher nit,” said Grampa Les. “I bin hearin’ dey bin habbin’ one o’ dem ventrillerquirmmers. Dem guys alleez be cuttin’ me up.”

“This is a bachelor party,” said Rudy. “And Basil’s has Simoan on the main stage at 10:00.”

“I have heard good things,” agreed Lance. Then he farted loudly.

“Træez mōk jeneēr!” exclaimed Herschel. “Shouldn’t you say excuse me?”

Lance waved him off. “Not to worry, old chum. My flatulence has no odour.”

As the shortest member of the group, Iggy, who was really Sam’s nose was right at fart level. He coughed and his eyes watered. “I really think we should get going,” he said. “The sooner the better.”

“We still haven’t decided where to go,” said Herschel.

“Let’s let the dice decide,” said Rudy. He picked up a blue twenty-sided die¹⁰ and rolled it across the table.

IGGY, WHO WAS REALLY SAM ROLLED OVER IN THE BATHTUB. The die had stopped on 14. There was a short argument about what that meant, which they resolved by rolling the die again. It came up on 6. Six meant Basil’s, he remembered. He strained Iggy’s aching head to remember what happened next. His memories seemed dim, but then he realized that his memories were dim because *Basil’s Tavern* was so dim. He had never been in a darker room. When he closed his eyes, it was brighter

¹⁰ A twenty-sided geometric solid is known as an ‘icosahedron’, which is a word that seldom appears in Christmas stories, and is even more difficult to say ten times fast than ‘Stig’s stag.’ An icosahedron has 20 equilateral triangles as faces. It has 12 vertices and 30 edges. Properly played, the word ‘icosahedron’ will score as many as 239 points in a game of Scrabble.

than Basil's had been. Then an image of the 'entertainment' surfaced in his mind, and he was grateful for the darkness.

There was a final toast, and the group staggered out of the *Laughing Ninja* and, laughing, climbed into a cab.

"*Basil's Tavern*," said Lance. He pronounced the words so exactly that he even articulated the italics.

"An' don't yer be tinkin' o' tekkin'; any o' dem dere shorten cutters," said Grampa Les, wagging a knobbly finger accusingly.

The taxi let them out in front of the Tavern. Lance paid the cover with three crisp ten dollar bills and slipped a fourth across the table. "That one is for you," he said, and winked at the moustachioed woman at the door.

They sat down in a row of chairs along the main stage. "This is right where the action is," said Rudy. He arranged a stack of dollar coins in front of him. A skinny woman took their drink orders.

"I'll have a beer," giggled Stig, who was really Jody. "I just realized how much I really like beer. I never knew what I was missing."

A round of drinks arrived and an act performed on the main stage. And then another round and another act. And another and another. Soon, Rudy was out of dollar coins and the group found themselves once more crowded in the back of a cab and on their way to the *Howling Coyote*.

Iggy, who was really Sam, remembered that he had seen a small party being pestered by a tramp as they drove by. "I hope they are okay," he thought fuzzily. "You never can tell with tramps."

There was a big fight going on at the *Howling Coyote* when they arrived. This was only to be expected – the *Howling Coyote* hosted two or three bar fights every night. Iggy, who was really Sam, smiled at the memory of breaking a whiskey bottle over some drunk's head. Grampa Les had chewed him out for that. "Rattle gum buzzard wrapper, boy," Grampa Les had sworn at him. "Der still be plenny o' good whikkey in dat botter. Neck time, bust wonner dose empy wonners." He cocked his old grizzled head back, emptied his bottle with a few quick gulps and passed it to Iggy, who was really Sam. "Use dat wonner frim ner on."

For a smaller man, Herschel was an exceptional bar fighter. He picked up a broken table leg and, spinning it like a baton, cleared a path to the far side of the room where the fighting was a little more subdued. "By Grågñöorr's hand!" he shouted, as he swung the table leg into some stranger's face.

They reached an empty table and sat down. Some more drinks arrived and Iggy, who was really Sam, laughed hard at a very amusing ventriloquist. Then, another fight broke out.

Stig, who was really Jody, hiccupped. "Maybe we should find someplace a little safer," she suggested. "Right after we have another round." She ordered another beer. "And don't forget the little sword with the cherry," she shouted after the waitress.

"Do you suppose Stig is all right?" asked Herschel.

"I didn't know that he was such a lightweight," said Lance. "He really can't hold his liquor tonight."

Grampa Les slurped on his whiskey and started telling war stories. "Dis bar brahllin' ain't nuddin'" he began. "I faht inner biggun."

"The Second World War?" asked Rudy.

"Noop. Der one afore dat," said Grampa Les.

"World War One?" asked Herschel.

"Der one afore dat one," said Grampa Les. And he took another pull from his glass.

Three rounds later, they decided to have just one more round before they left. And three rounds after that, they did leave. That was because Stig, who was really Jody, started telling them about this amazing video game she had been playing earlier that night. Even though it sounded like a lot of fun, Iggy, who was really Sam, had a nagging feeling that maybe they should not all go back to Stig, who was really Jody's place to play it.

Iggy, who was really Sam, pulled himself to the edge of the bathtub and climbed out. This took him several minutes and involved considerable effort and concentration. He stepped out onto the bathroom floor. He remembered they all came back to the room above the garage to play video games. And now he remembered what he was supposed to tell Stig. He was supposed to tell Stig *not* to play the video game.

It was a little too late to tell them now, he supposed. Now they all knew what could go wrong. Now they all knew better than to invite Glenn, the mechanic from the room next door to join them. He could warn Glenn about the video game now, he supposed, but he was not sure which of the people sleeping it off in the living room *was* Glenn.

They all had some really good laughs at first. That was why Glenn knocked on the door, to see what they were all laughing about. And they passed him a game controller and a highball and then Grampa Les wanted a turn and Herschel wanted a rematch and then ... and then ... and then it was probably for the best that they were all still sleeping. That was when Iggy, who was really Sam, made his way to the bathtub to have a little nap.

He leaned over the sink and stared in the mirror. He looked terrible. He was glad that it was Iggy's face that he was looking at, because he would hate to see his own face look that badly. His shirt was open and Iggy, who was really Sam, stared at his chest in the mirror. Then he remembered one last thing.

"Oh yes, the dare," he said out loud. "I had forgotten about that." But he remembered it now. They had dared him to do it, and after another gutnumber, he accepted their dare. Iggy was not going to be pleased when he found out.

He ran his finger along Iggy's bare chest. The word 'Sam' was tattooed across it, with the letter 'S' formed by a coiled green snake.

He looked back up to the mirror. Over his shoulder he saw his own face, glaring at him. He turned around.

Sam, who was really Iggy, stood behind him, arms crossed. "I'm not very pleased about that," he said.

"It gets worse," said Iggy, who was really Sam.

IN EVERY EPISODE OF *Really Extremely Made Over Homes*, Pie personally creates a special room for the lucky contestants. Great care is taken to keep the special room a secret until it is revealed towards the end of the episode.

In this case, Pie would appear to have single-handedly excavated a cave underneath the house, accessible only by a fire-pole, which was hidden behind a secret door in the bedroom closet. Stig and Jody did not really have much use for a secret underground lair, but Pie never let such practical considerations stand in the way of making great television. The footage of Pie driving a giant auger, apparently unnoticed by the rest of the crew, would surely make for some ratings rocking television. And the lair itself was a wonder. It was lit with specially made electric torches that cast long shadows throughout the cavern. Water dripped down the cave walls from hidden pipes. A little wooden bridge spanned a narrow creek that wound through it. It would be a most romantic spot if it were not so gloomy.

Of course, Pie's special room was not really a secret to the rest of the crew. After all, they were the ones who actually had to build the place. Pie was a genius with a megaphone, but he was hopeless when it came to tools. He could only figure out the business end of a screwdriver about half of the time. So, a team of nearly fifty craftsmen were put to work digging a great hole under the house. Even now, a finishing crew was

working in the cave, hanging stalactites. But, for dramatic purposes, all of the scenes involving the special room were edited to make it appear as though Pie alone had undertaken the job.

Pie gripped a shovel and looked into the camera. “We have to get it right for this family,” he said. It was another one of those things he said every episode, as if the audience needed to be reminded that Pie and his crew were going to ‘get it right’. Not that it really mattered: anything they did not ‘get right’ would not make it into the final edit.

There had been a short delay when the digging crew uncovered the bones of some large animal. An enraged cry was heard when Pie inspected the site. He was on a tight schedule and had no time for this discovery. If he reported the find, it was likely that various historical agencies would want to investigate it. This could even shut down construction. Pie could have none of that, not with the broadcast date only a few days away. He ordered the crew to hide the bones and dig around them. He thought he heard a grateful call from the hills beyond, but he quickly forgot about it.

Stig and Jody’s new house was rapidly taking shape. The framed skeleton of the new house rose four stories over the underground cave. Staircases spiralled up through the wood frame, past partially finished rooms and hallways. The crew had only three days left to complete the project, and were working furiously to meet that deadline. The first floor was mostly complete and now several workers were madly banging and screwing on the second.¹¹

Pie giggled happily into his bullhorn. A Christmas wedding, broadcast live on a very special episode of *Really Extremely Made Over Homes*. There was a real chance that every single television in the country would be tuned in to see it. The potential profits of such a program were more than even Pie could imagine; and when it came to profits, Pie had a very vivid imagination, indeed.

Only three more days, thought Pie. Three more days until the big event. He could not wait.

“**W**E CAN’T WAIT,” said Stig, who was really Jody. “We’re getting married in three days. You have to fix this!”

Yugo shrugged his shoulders. “I’m trying,” he said, “But you have to be patient.”

¹¹ Oh come on. Get your mind out of the gutter.

Yugo stood in the middle of the room above Pie's garage. Seated around him were all of the guests from Stig's bachelor party, still a little groggy from their antics of the night before. Iggy, who was really Sam, leaned against the wall with his hands pressed against his temples.

Yugo had finally found Stig, who was really Jody, and the others shortly after dawn. Iggy, who was really Sam, was right. It did get worse. The partygoers had arrived home to play with the Pii. Stig, who was really Jody, had started up the game and then went to bed while the others played. Iggy, who was really Sam, crept into the bathroom to sleep it off. It did not occur to either of them to warn the others about any of the known hazards of playing video games, such as the risk of seizures, reduced attention span and, in the case of the Pii, spontaneous irreversible personality transfer.

It had only taken a few moments before Rudy and Herschel were absorbed by the game. They merrily shot each other with all manner of fantastic ordnance. Then Grampa Les joined in, and Glenn, the mechanic from next door showed up and he wanted a turn, too. Lance turned over his controller and got up to refill his glass. Within the game, Rudy inadvertently detonated a pocket sized nuclear device while trying to escape from some of the others. The session ended with a bang.

"Recgnurrk maş-t prümm?" asked Rudy, who was really Herschel. "What happened?"

Herschel, who was really Glenn the Mechanic, stood up and said, "Look at me! I'm short! Why aren't I tall! I can't go to work like this!"

Glenn the Mechanic, who was really Grampa Les, swore, "tub rubber peanut butter spandex! I be feelin jes great. I ain't been feelin' so good in many o' year an a bit." He flexed Glenn's powerful bicep and grinned broadly. "Jes lookee at me. I be bigger an' stronger den 'Mazin' Man even!" Alert flinched involuntarily from the other side of the room.

Grampa Les, who was really Rudy groaned, "Speak for yourself. I feel terrible. My joints are killing me. All of my joints ache. I didn't know I had so many joints." He stood up, but his skinny legs wobbled too much for him to take a step and he sat back down.

They all glared at Yugo. The little elf walked into the middle of the room. "I'm sure it is only temporary," he explained again. "Things will sort themselves out if you just give it a little more time."

Jody, who was really Stig, said, "we don't have much more time. We can't put off the wedding. The deal I made with the television people to fix my house is pretty clear about that.

Stig, who was really Jody started crying. "I'm getting married on television in three days. My wedding dress will never fit!"

Jody, who was really Stig, wrapped his arm around her broad shoulders. "Tek yer time," chirped Glenn, who was really Grampa Les. "I be fiddler den a fiddler."

"Why are you still talking like that?" asked Rudy who was really Herschel.

"Whadder yer be yabberin' 'bout, yer young whippercracker?" snapped Glenn, who was really Grampa Les. "I be spekkin' righter an rain burrels."

"Sorry," said Rudy who was really Herschel. "I always thought you talked that way because you didn't have any teeth."

Glenn who was really Grampa Les grinned. "An lookee at me now," he said. "I git me some o' dem pearly white choppers. And I git me some o' dem udder new parts, too. Parts I ain't been usin' fer years. I'm a gonna' be callin' on Missus Hawkins straight 'way."

Jody, who was really Stig, winced.

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Sam, who was really Iggy. "We're just going cause more trouble running around in the wrong bodies." He made a knowing look in the direction of Iggy, who was really Sam's new tattoo.

"I can't stay here," complained Herschel, who was really Glenn. "I have to get to work. In fact, I'm already late!"

"I'm pretty sure you could call in sick," offered Yugo.

"Oh sure," said Herschel who was really Glenn. "What would I tell them? I got short man's disease?"

"By Åxxmerq's beard!" shouted Rudy, who was really Herschel. "There's nothing wrong with that body. In fact, it's perfect!"

"Perfect?" countered Herschel, who was really Glenn. "Look at me! I'm a runt!"

"Please, let's not fight," said Sam, who was really Iggy. "You look perfectly tall to me. We're all going through some ... changes. It is going to take a while to get used to them."

"I don't know if I can get used to this," groaned Grampa Les, who was really Rudy. "I have this terrible craving for prune juice."

"Dat' good stuff. Itter kip yer regaller," said Glenn, who was really Grampa Les.

"I am afraid that I am unable to perceive what the issue is here," interjected Lance, who was still really Lance.

"That's because you're still you," said Rudy, who was really Herschel.

“Precisely,” replied Lance. “There is nothing wrong with me. So what is the problem?” Like most lawyers, Lance had issues with empathy. Lance’s issue was that he had none.

“You’re not helping,” said Iggy, who was really Sam. He wandered into the kitchen, pulled a bag of frozen peas out of the freezer and pressed them against his face.

“I’m sure Yugo will set things right in no time. Right Yugo?” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“I’m trying,” he said.

“Good. Then the rest of us will just have to act normal in the meantime,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“But what about the wedding?” cried Stig, who was really Jody.

“We’re going to have to go through with it,” said Jody, who was really Stig. “We have a contract.”

“Can’t we get out of it?” she looked towards Lance.

Lance shrugged. “I really don’t know much about contracts,” he said. “I’m not that kind of a lawyer.” Jody, who was really Stig, wondered what kind of a lawyer Lance really was, since he did not seem to know much about any area of the law.

“And what about the rest of us?” asked Rudy, who was really Herschel. “Christmas is almost here. I have a lot of things to do in the next couple of days.”

“Rudy’s right,” said Herschel, who was really Glenn.

“I’m Herschel,” said Rudy, who was really Herschel.

“I thought I was Herschel?” asked Herschel, who was really Glenn.

“No you’re Glenn,” said Grampa Les, who was really Rudy. “I’m Rudy.”

“Ima gettin’ virry cornfuddled,” said Glenn, who was really Grampa Les.

“We’re all a little cornfuddled,” said Grampa Les, who was really Rudy. “But Herschel is right. We all have a lot to do in the next few days. My body is already expected at home.” The others all began talking at once about the places their bodies were expected to be over Christmas.

Yugo interrupted them. “You are all going to have to help each other out until we can restore you to your proper bodies. Grampa Les, you’ll have to go take Glenn’s shift for him in the garage. Glenn, Herschel works at Pasquale’s Bakery on Vine Street. Sunday is pie day, so get ready to roll some dough. Herschel, you need to go to Rudy’s place and look after his mom. And Rudy, we’ll take you home. I mean to Grampa Les’ home.”

“What about us?” asked Jody, who was really Stig.

“You two have a wedding to get ready for,” said Yugo. He pulled a small electronic device out of his pocket, flipped it open and tapped a few small keys. The device chirped in his hand a cast a pale blue glow on his face. “In fact, you have a tuxedo fitting at 3:00, Jody. And Stig, you have tea with your bridesmaids this afternoon.”

Everyone stared at Yugo numbly. He snapped the device closed. “Well, what are you waiting for? Let’s get going,” he said. “And remember, be safe out there.”

YUGO SLOWED THE SNOWMOBILE DOWN AS he approached the construction site where *Really Extremely Made Over Homes* was being shot. Grampa Les lived next door, with Jody’s sister Rhonda.

“Just do your best to pass for Grampa Les until we can sort this all out,” Yugo said to Grampa Les, who was really Rudy.

“How am I supposed to do that?” asked Rudy.

“Just make sure you talk with your mouth full and don’t make any sense. Then you’ll do fine,” said Iggy, who was really Sam.

“And swear a lot,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“Oh cumquat,” said Rudy, trying to swear like Grampa Les.

“That’s not quite right,” said Iggy, who was really Sam. “Try cumquat curdle onion spam whammer.”

“What?” said Grampa Les, who was really Rudy.

“Or feeble lampfish moron cranker,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“Rotten fidget marble wart hammer,” said Grampa Les, who was really Rudy.

“Now you’re getting the hang of it,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“Just try and spit a little more when you say it,” said Iggy, who was really Sam.

They left Grampa Les, who was really Rudy, shuffling up the front walk and cursing under his breath, “Rupert meerkat maple flapper pancake ...”

Yugo turned towards the construction site. “Come on, let’s have a look at what’s going on,” he said.

Iggy, who was really Sam, rolled his narrow dark eyes. There were few things in the world Yugo liked more than touring a construction site.

They followed him as he slipped under the big orange tarpaulins that surrounded it.

They found themselves a few feet behind a bank of cameras that were filming hundreds of workers dashing about the partially built house. One exterior wall was finished in with rough white bricks. A turret was beginning to take shape in one corner of the house. Two craftsmen were levelling a twenty foot tall eucalyptus and ebony door at the front.

“Oh no,” said Yugo. “This will never do. Stig and Jody are going to hate this.”

“It doesn’t seem to be their style,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“It’s just so ... much,” said Iggy, who was really Sam. His eyes darted from the bank of solar panels being lowered onto the roof, to the marble columns supporting the third floor balcony and finally to the huge blown glass fountain that was perched in the middle of the front lawn.

Pie Tenninate stood beside the blown glass fountain interviewing a heavily made up young blond woman. She wore a sequined bikini top together with an extremely short skirt and extremely tall boots. The elves recognized her at once as Whitney Queers, famous singer and frequent attendee at rehab clinics worldwide.

“It’s Whitney Queers!” hissed Iggy, who was really Sam.

“We know,” Yugo and Sam, who was really Iggy, hissed back.

“What’s she doing here?” asked Iggy, who was really Sam.

“They always have a famous guest star on this show,” said Sam, who was really Iggy. The elves leaned forward to listen to the interview, which was not hard, as Pie conducted his part of the conversation through his bullhorn.

“Ms. Queers, it’s great to have you on the show,” bellowed Pie.

“It’s Whitney, witch,” replied Whitney Queers.

“All right then, Whitney, what brings you to the set of *Really Extremely Made Over Homes*?”

“I have some, like, community service obligations,” replied Whitney.

Pie smiled weakly at the camera. They would edit that remark out in post production. “Do you have a song for us today?” he prodded.

“Oh yes,” said Whitney. “I’m like, gonna do my, like, new song. It’s called, like, you know, *Gimme Somethin’*. I wrote it because I, like, wanted somethin’.”

“That’s great, Whitney,” Pie yelled into his bullhorn. He turned to the cameras. “Ladies and Gentlemen, Ms. Whitney Queers.”

With that, loud music pumped from a stack of black speakers behind the blown glass fountain. Whitney raised a microphone to her mouth and started swaying to the beat, while shouting “gimme somethin’” repeatedly into her microphone. Hairline cracks formed on the base of the fountain.

“She’s great, isn’t she?” asked Iggy, who was really Sam. He snapped Iggy’s long fingers in time with the music.

“She’s a bit of an acquired taste,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“I heard this song might be the Christmas number one,”¹² said Iggy, who was really Sam.

“Go figure,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“Great dress, too,” said Iggy, who was really Sam.

“Gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’,” Whitney Queers lip synced along with the sound track. Her belly button seemed to wink with every ‘somethin’ she mimed.

“Does this song have any more words?” asked Sam, who was really Iggy.

“That’s just the first verse,” said Sam. “Here comes the chorus.”

“Gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’; gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’ more!” Whitney pretended to shout. She shook her hips and spun around.

Sam, who was really Iggy, looked around him. “Hey, where’s Yugo?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” said Iggy, who was really Sam, without looking. He remained transfixed by Whitney Queers’ winking naval.

“Gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’,” Whitney mouthed to the second verse of her new hit song.

Sam, who was really Iggy slipped away and darted behind the camera crew. He walked alongside a trailer and then finally found Yugo kneeling on top of a long table covered with rolls of blueprints. He held a sharp pencil in his hand, which scratched swiftly across the large pages.

“Yugo, what are you doing?” Sam, who was really Iggy said.

¹² Every year record companies in England compete to have the number one song on the British popular music chart. The top selling single the week before Christmas is christened the ‘Christmas Number One’. Some of the unforgettable songs to be crowned the Christmas Number One include *Mr. Blobby* by Mr Blobby (1993), *Can We Fix It?* by Bob the Builder (2000) and *There’s No One Quite Like Grandma* by the St. Winifred’s School Choir (1980). The British are a strange lot.

Yugo turned around and smiled. "I'm just making a few modifications," he said.

"Come on, let's get out of here before we cause any more trouble," said Sam, who was really Iggy.

Yugo set the pencil down and hopped off of the table. The two elves got back to Iggy, who was really Sam, just as Whitney Queers was wrapping up her number.

"Gimme somethin', gimme somethin', gimme somethin', gimme somethin', gimme somethin', gimme somethin', gimme somethin', gimme somethin', gimme somethin', gimme somethin', gimme somethin', gimme somethin', gimme somethin', gimme somethin', gimme somethin' more!" sang Whitney. The music suddenly stopped and she gave a low bow. Iggy, who was really Sam's heart nearly stopped.

Sam, who was really Iggy pulled on his sleeve. "Let's go," he said.

"Do you think we could get an autograph?" asked Iggy, who was really Sam.

"No," said Yugo.

"Ah come on," said Iggy, who was really Sam. "You gotta gimme somethin'!"

"No," said Sam, who was really Iggy, and together, he and Yugo dragged their friend back to the snowmobile.

IGGY, YUGO AND SAM SPENT THAT NIGHT IN THE SNOWMOBILE. This was not nearly as cramped or uncomfortable as one might expect, for Yugo's snowmobile was not anything one would expect. As the sun set on that 23rd of December, Yugo pressed a small blue button on his key fob. The rear hatch of the snowmobile rose on its quiet hydraulics and a long red box slowly slid out of the back. It stopped with a quiet click, and then the sides of the box slowly expanded until they, too, clicked to a stop. Then the top and bottom of the box expanded, until the bottom rested on the ground and the top formed into a peaked roof. A small chimney popped out.

A line appeared on the near side of the box and slowly formed a rectangle. Yugo walked up to it and pressed on the rectangle, which Iggy and Sam could now see was a small door.

He motioned them inside. Iggy and Sam stepped into the large box and into a comfortably appointed suite. There was a leather sofa against one wall and a flat screen television hung on the opposite side. A tiny

fireplace glowed in the corner. Across the room an arched doorway led into a small bedroom, where a three-tiered elf sized bunk bed stood beside a little nightstand.

“Dibs on the top bunk,” called Iggy, who was really Sam. He dashed through the archway and leapt up onto the uppermost bunk. Yugo sat down at a small writing desk and spent the evening reviewing diagrams of the Pii, searching for a way to reverse the personality transfer. Sam, who was really Iggy, made some popcorn in the little kitchen nook and then turned on *It’s A Wonderful Life* on the big plasma screen television.

Yugo was still bent over with his nose nearly touching his drawings when Sam, who was really Iggy, shut down the television and went to bed.

Grampa Les, who was really Rudy, found himself in less comfortable circumstances. Grampa Les was on a restricted diet, which was high in fibre and low in things that tasted good. He could not eat sodium, fat, transfats, preservatives, cholesterol, carbohydrates, aspartame, or riboflavin. Rudy found the resulting supper of gruel and prune juice a little bland. For dessert, he had a large selection of coloured pills, which he washed down with more prune juice. He found the strain of conversing in spit and gibberish to be exhausting and so went to bed early. Grampa Les’ bedroom at Rhonda’s house was just a cot set up in the laundry room with a worn blanket on top. It did not matter to Rudy that the cot was not very comfortable, as he spent most of the night walking back and forth to the washroom. He was surprised to find an old blue teddy bear tangled in the blankets. It had no eyes and hardly any stuffing. Rudy tucked it under his arm all the same.

Herschel spent the evening at Rudy’s house, which was really Rudy’s mother’s house. He quickly understood why Rudy had never left home. He was treated to a six-course meal for dinner that included everything that Grampa Les was forbidden from eating. His bed was neatly made, and the flannel pyjamas he found under the pillow were crisply folded and still warm from the iron. He missed his books, but decided that he could keep on being Rudy for a while. He just hoped that Glenn took good care of Ben and Jerry.

Glenn arrived at Herschel’s apartment covered in flour. His arms ached from rolling piecrust all day. He crouched down to get through the door, then remembered that this was no longer necessary – Herschel’s body was at least a foot and a half shorter than his own. He hung his jacket on the hook by the door, which was placed much lower on the wall than Glenn expected. The rest of the wall was lined with bookshelves, and each shelf was filled with novels about wizards and other bold adventurers. In fact, Herschel’s entire apartment was filled with books. Glenn had read only three books in his entire life, and each one of those had more pictures than words in it. He lifted one from the top shelf and

casually flipped through the pages. It was *Curse of the Ant King: Volume 13 on the Anticarian Cycle*. Glenn was still reading it six hours later when he decided that he should go to bed. He set down the volume and shambled into Herschel's little bedroom. He turned on the lights and then he fainted dead away. He was simply unprepared to face the sight of the two enormous tarantulas named Ben and Jerry, who lived in a glass terrarium on Herschel's nightstand.

Grampa Les spent the day tinkering with the engines in Pie's garage. His automotive training was confined to changing the oil of his old Dodge in the 1950's, so there were a lot of parts he did not recognize under the hoods of Pie's European sports cars. Grampa Les was not one for letting his lack of knowledge or experience keep his from getting his hands dirty, and he gleefully adjusted springs and hoses and oiled other parts all day long. That night, he ate steak for the first time in over twenty years. He could get used to this, he thought, as he stretched his powerful arms and lay back on the pillow. He had not had to get up once in the night to go to the washroom. Beside him, Mrs Hawkins snored softly, a wide grin on her sleeping face.

Lance rolled over on his sheets of 2200 thread count Egyptian cotton. He slept like a man without a care in the world.

The story continues on page 60.

You may go there directly if you like. This would also be a good time to set down this story and go get a cookie and a glass of milk.

IT WAS AMATEUR NIGHT AT THE *HOWLING COYOTE*. The *Howling Coyote* was one of those places that was decorated like the inside of a garage. There were bicycles and other unlikely objects hanging on the walls. A kayak hung from the ceiling. There were even oil stains on the cement floor.

A young woman who seemed to have forgotten to finish dressing showed them to a small table near the stage, where a banjo playing quintet was pounding their way through a heavy metal tune. The lead singer screamed about how they were all Satan's slaves.

They ordered their drinks and Sam, who was really Iggy, looked around the room. "I don't see them anywhere," he said.

"Maybe they haven't arrived yet," said Yugo.

"I can't see any reason why they would leave, once they got here," said Alert, as the band sang about hordes of demons overrunning the world, while pummeling away at their their banjos.

"The drinks are cheap," said Jody, who was really Stig. "That's why we come here." As he spoke, the waitress set three large mugs of beer on the table. She set a tall blue glass topped with pink foam in front of Jody, who was really Stig. A tiny paper parasol pierced through three cherries and a lemon slice floated on the foam. He plucked it out and nibbled daintily on one of the cherries while the other three stared at him.

"What?" asked Jody, who was really Stig. "I just felt like drinking something pretty," he said.

Yugo giggled.

"I think I have one of their albums," said Alert as the band furiously plinked to a crescendo and finished with a chorus of "hail Satan," before bowing and leaving the stage. The crowd applauded politely.

A young man dressed in a large green sweater and blue jeans introduced the next act, "Please give a big hand for the comedic stylings of Benny and Bongo." A man in a loose tuxedo with a big puppet took to the stage.

"Hey, a ventriloquist," said Sam, who was really Iggy. "I always wondered how they do that."

"They just talk without moving their lips," explained Yugo.

Benny introduced his puppet, a big English sheepdog named Bongo. Then Bongo sang a song about how people who lived in New Bedlam were stupid and dated ugly girls. It was not very funny, and the crowd grumbled uncomfortably.

"He's not a very good ventriloquist, is he?" remarked Alert.

“And that dog is just mean,” said Yugo, as Bongo told a couple of insulting jokes.

A man at the back of the room stood up and shouted “get that stupid dog off the stage!”

Bongo looked at the man and called him a name that has no place in a story about Christmas elves.

The man grabbed a napkin holder from his table and threw it at the stage. It struck one of the speakers at the side of the stage and then fell onto another table, scattering drinks and snacks on the group seated there.

Bongo taunted him some more, and dared him to try again. Meantime, the customers from the other table who had their meal ruined began pointing and shouting themselves. Another patron, slightly the worse for drink shouted at them all to sit down. Then Bongo remarked that his mother bore a passing resemblance to a certain hockey player and the fight was on.

A plate of nachos flew over Yugo’s head and a bottle exploded off a nearby wall. Somebody threw a fruit punch and the next moment fists and glasses alike were flying.

Then people started swinging chairs. In films, chairs break easily when swung across a stuntman’s back. The furniture at the *Howling Coyote* was made of sterner stuff, however – properly swung, spines will crack long before the chairs will. Suddenly, the bar was filled with the sound of cracking spines.

“Let’s get out of here, before someone gets killed,” said Jody, who was really Stig.

They got up from their table as Bongo began a racist tirade that slandered every minority imaginable before concluding, “and don’t get me started about elves. Elves are the worst sort of people. If you can call them people, which you can’t.”

“That’s it, let me at that dog!” Yugo shouted. He turned and made his way back towards the stage. Alert and Sam, who was really Iggy tackled him and then dragged him across the beer soaked floor. “Stop it! Stop it! I just want to give that dog a piece of my mind!” Yugo pleaded.

Jody who was really Stig led them through the melee. The floor was slick with spilled drinks and food and he wobbled a little in his heels before he steadied himself by leaning on a pile of wrestling patrons. A drunken fighter took a swing at Alert, but he deftly blocked the punch and then levelled his attacker with a firmly placed knee to the groin. Sam, who was really Iggy, whistled in admiration.

They stumbled out the front door just as three police cars pulled up, their lights flashing and their sirens blaring. Yugo got up to his feet and meekly followed the others past the police cars.

“Now what?” asked Sam, who was really Iggy. “Where should we go now?”

If you have not gone to *Basil's Tavern* yet, you reckon that Stig, who is really Jody, might be found there. You head straight away to find the Tavern on page 68.

If you have already been to *Basil's Tavern*, you decide that it is getting very late and you think it is best to just head back to the room over Pie's garage. You will find it on page 39.

IGGY WOKE UP EARLY ON CHRISTMAS EVE. He had always been an early riser, but he found Sam's body was heavy and lethargic. It resisted all of his efforts to get out of bed. He struggled to open Sam's eyes and raise his head, but it was futile. Against his will, Sam's thick arm pulled the bedspread up to his double chin. He lay that way for nearly an hour, until he was finally able to will Sam's reluctant eyes to open and his resisting body to slowly climb out from beneath the warmth of the covers and out of bed.

He noticed that Yugo's bunk was empty and neatly made. It did not look like it had been slept in. He walked into the little sitting room. Yugo was slumped over his notes and drawings, snoring softly. He must have stayed up all night trying to reverse the problems with the Pii. Sam, who was really Iggy, yawned involuntarily. He lifted a blanket off of the back of the sofa and placed it gently over Yugo's shoulders.

He looked down at Sam's prodigious belly. "I have to do something about this," he said to himself. He went into the little kitchen and quickly prepared a small protein lettuce shake. Then he pulled on a sweatshirt, laced up a pair of pointy-toed jogging shoes and headed out for a morning run.

He made it to the end of the block before he had to stop. He bent over, coughing and gasping for air. His cheeks burned. His heart, Sam's heart, was pounding so fast and so hard that Iggy was afraid that it might explode.

"This is going to be a little harder than I thought," Iggy said. He coughed again. An urge was building in his backside, the overwhelming desire to lie down on a couch, with a remote control and a bag of potato chips. He strained for air as Sam's body turned itself around and started back towards the snowmobile. Iggy was powerless. It was all he could do to keep breathing. He gave up, and meekly let Sam's body carry him back to the sofa.

WEDDINGS ARE A BIT LIKE HOUSES. They both have stories. Just like a house, weddings are better with lots of people at them. Another way that weddings are similar to houses, that you may have noticed, is that you can't put one together in a day. It takes a lot of work.

Stig and Jody had a wedding and a house that had to be ready by Christmas and they both still needed a lot of work. By late afternoon on Christmas Eve, Pie Tenninate and his crew were frantic. They were desperately renovating the renovations they had already renovated to

accord with Pie's blueprints. They only had one more day to finish the job. It was going to be a long night.

By late afternoon on Christmas Eve, Jody was frantic. While it is not uncommon for a prospective bride to be frantic on the day before her wedding, it is uncommon for that bride to be inside the body of the groom. And that was making Jody more frantic than the usual bride.

She wanted to be pretty for her wedding. Stig was a lot of things, but pretty was one thing he was not. He was handsome enough, but his face was hard and prickly. She had tried to shave it the day before, but just cut it painfully. Shaving the thick hair off of Stig's legs had made a bloody mess. Stig's hands were big and strong, but she found them difficult to control. She was used to her small, delicate fingers. Stig's fingers were thick and clumsy. But shaving had been the least of her problems. Going to the bathroom -- that was just, well, she did not like to think about it.

It was not that she did not like Stig's body. In fact, she liked it a lot. She just liked it better from the outside, than she did from the inside. And while she liked being able to reach things on the top shelf and being able to open jars, she really just wanted her old body back. And she wanted it back before her wedding.

She had spent the evening before getting Stig's tuxedo fitted. She found the jacket to be heavy and hot. The pants were cinched tight around her waist with a wide cummerbund that made it difficult to breathe. She decided that the shirt was a little too plain and exchanged it for one with a frilly collar and lace trim on the cuffs. That, at least, made her feel a little prettier.

She slipped the tuxedo, along with the lacy shirt into its bag and pulled the zipper closed.

"Come on, Stig, it's time to go to the rehearsal," she called. Before every wedding, there is a wedding rehearsal. This way people can practice getting married. It would probably be better, all things considered, if people could practice *being* married before the wedding, but nobody has been able to figure out a convenient way to do that. So, people practice getting married, and then figure out the being married part later on.

There was no answer. This only made Jody even more frantic than before. "Stig?" she called again. Still nothing.

She set the bag with her tuxedo down and headed towards the bedroom. She knocked on the door and then pushed it open without waiting for an answer.

"Stig!" she shouted.

"What?" replied Stig, batting his long dark lashes in her direction.

“How many times do I have to ask you to leave those alone,” said Jody. “They aren’t toys, you know.”

“Sorry, Jody,” said Stig. He buttoned up his blouse.

“Come on,” she said. “It’s time to go.”

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” replied Stig. He followed her out of the room.

“And I really wish that you would wear a bra,” she added. “My mother’s going to be there.”

Stig dropped his narrow shoulders and sulked back into the bedroom. “If I have to,” he said, glumly.

Jody could only wait for a few moments before that frantic feeling swept over her again. “What is taking so long?” she barked.

“Just a minute. It’s a lot easier to take these things off than it is to put them on,” Stig grunted. “And I still need to fix my face.”

“You look fine,” said Jody. “Come on, we’re going to be late.” She tapped her big foot impatiently. She hated Stig’s shoes. None of them had any heel at all to speak of.

Finally, Stig stepped out of the bathroom. His lipstick was a mess. It looked like it had been drawn on by a two year old.

“What happened to you?” asked Jody.

“Putting on makeup is a lot harder than it looks, you know,” said Stig.

“Oh nonsense,” muttered Jody. “It’s a piece of pie.”

“Don’t you mean cake?” said Stig.

“Huh?” asked Jody.

“What?” said Stig.

“Pardon?” asked Jody.

“Cake,” repeated Stig. “Don’t you mean it’s a piece of cake?”

Jody shrugged. “I like pie,” she said.

Stig nodded. He liked pie, too.

Getting to the rehearsal was a piece of pie, because it was being held downstairs in Pie’s garage. Pie wanted to edit a few clips from the rehearsal into the second half of *Really Extremely Made Over Homes*, to give his audience a taste of what Stig and Jody were doing to get ready for their wedding. With the use of special effects, it would look like the rehearsal had taken place in a church. Pie felt that this would lend an air of reality to the event. Since it was a lot cheaper to create a digital church set in post-production than to actually rent a church and shoot the rehearsal scenes there, Pie had blocked off part of his garage for the

shoot. It was all part of the magic of reality television, proclaimed Pie. "Nobody would ever know the difference."

Stig and Jody were just as happy to have the rehearsal close by, which spared them the argument over who would drive. Usually when they went anywhere, Stig drove. But over the last few days, Stig and Jody had undergone some reversals of their usual roles. When they had gone for dinner the previous night, Jody had insisted on driving.

"But, I'm the guy," said Stig. "The guy always drives."

"Not now you aren't," said Jody. "I'm the guy now." She took the car keys from Stig's purse and stuffed them into her pocket.

"I know," said Stig. "But I'm really the guy."

"You don't look like the guy to me," said Jody.

"But I am," said Stig.

"I am," said Jody.

"Me," said Stig.

"Me," said Jody.

"Me."

"Me."

"Me."

"Me."

"Look, you can't drive," said Jody. "You leave the seat too far forward."

"That's you who does that," said Stig.

"No, that's what you do," said Jody.

"No, you," said Stig.

"No, you," said Jody.

"You."

"You."

"You."

"You."

In the end, they took a cab.

So, they were both grateful that they only had to walk down a flight of stairs to get to their wedding rehearsal. They came in together through an open garage door and joined the small group of friends and family who had gathered at one end of the garage, where a camera crew from

Really Extremely Made Over Homes was taking a few test shots in front of a series of large blue screens.

“Well, it’s about time,” snorted Mrs. Hawkins. “We’ve been waiting for ages.” She petted Fredda gently behind a languorously drooping ear.

“I’m sorry Mom,” said Jody, who was really Stig. “I had a little trouble with my makeup.”

“So I see,” sneered Mrs. Hawkins. “And it’s still Mrs. Hawkins to you, young lady. You’re not family just yet.”

“Sorry, Mom, I mean, Mrs. Hawkins,” said Jody, who was really Stig.

“Well, well, well, the guests of honour are here at last,” a plump man with kindly features made his way over to Stig and Jody, who were really each other. He was wearing a long black robe with a stiff white colour and a brightly coloured sash. A gold cross hung from a chain around his neck. He was completely bald, except for two tufts of bright white hair that stuck out from either side of his head like a pair of furry earmuffs.

“Hello, Reverend,” said Stig, who was really Jody.

“Are we all set to get started, then? Is everyone in the wedding party here?” asked the Reverend.

Jody, who was really Stig, looked around. He spotted Lance off to one side. He was dressed in a designer suit, but had removed his jacket so that his belt and suspenders were both visible. Lance was not one to take any chances. Jody, who was really Stig, grabbed Lance by his silk shirtsleeve, pulled him over and introduced him to the Reverend.

“This is Lance,” said Jody, who was really Stig. “He’s my best man. I mean that he’s Jody’s best man. I mean he’s our best man. Lance, this is Reverend Blugenes.”

The Reverend gripped Lance’s manicured hand tightly in his and shook it warmly. He chuckled. “Brides always seem to get a little frantic right before the big day, don’t they Lance? It’s very nice to meet you.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” said Lance, with an orthodontically perfect smile. “Reverend Blugenes, eh? Just like the song.”

“What song?” asked Reverend Blugenes.

“Oh, you know the one,” said Lance. “I am sure that you hear it all of the time.” He hummed a few bars.

“  ”13

“That’s *Forever in Blue Jeans*,” interrupted Reverend Blugenes.

Lance shook his head. “No, no no,” he gently chided the Reverend. “It’s called *The Reverend Blue Jeans*. It was a big hit for Neil Diamond in the ‘70’s.”

The Reverend laid his hand on Lance’s shoulder. “My son, speaking as someone who was actually alive in the 1970’s, I assure you that the correct lyric is ‘forever in blue jeans.’ ‘The Reverend Blue Jeans’ doesn’t make any sense. Does it?”

Lance’s smile disappeared. “Are you sure?” he asked.

“I’m not allowed to lie to you,” the Reverend replied kindly.

Lance hummed a few more bars to himself. “Well, what do you know about that,” he said. “I always thought it was *The Reverend Blue Jeans*. I guess your way does make more sense.”

Stig, who was really Jody, sighed. “Sure he was Stig’s friend, but did he have to choose such a ninny to be his best man?” she wondered to herself.

Pie’s cameras started rolling as Reverend Blugenes began barking orders to the group. He ran a wedding rehearsal like a football practice, outlining where he wanted his team to stand and when he wanted them to move.

“Stig, you line up here. Lance, you stand there. And the others, Al, Rudy, Herschel all in a row.

Jody, who was really Stig, marched to where the Reverend had directed him. Lance, Alert, Grampa Les, who was really Rudy, and Rudy, who was really Herschel, followed.

“No, no, no, Jody. You don’t stand here,” said the Reverend. “You really are a frantic one aren’t you?”

Jody who was really Stig blinked dumbly at the Reverend.

“Back there,” pointed Reverend Blugenes. “You don’t come in until a little later.”

Jody, who was really Stig nodded and headed to the far side of the garage. Reverend Blugenes led Stig, who was really Jody, into the

groom's position and then led Grampa Les, who was really Rudy, to a empty seat in the front row, beside Iggy, who was really Sam, Yugo and Sam, who was really Iggy.

"This really is a frantic group," muttered the Reverend. He lined Lance up beside Stig, who was really Jody, then directed Alert, Rudy, who was really Herschel and Herschel who was really Glenn, into position. Then, he called for Jody to walk up to them.

Jody, who was really Stig, stood dumbly for a moment until he realised that this was his cue. He walked up slowly up and stood beside Stig, who was really Jody.

Reverend Blugenes ran through the service, and concluded with, "you may now kiss the bride."

Stig and Jody stared at each other awkwardly. Finally, Stig, who was really Jody, leaned forward. As their lips drew near, Jody, who was really Stig turned his face and let Stig, who was really Jody kiss him on the cheek.

"Oh my," said Reverend Blugenes. "I hope you two have a better kiss than that planned for the ceremony tomorrow." Stig and Jody just smiled shyly.

A family dinner was scheduled to follow the rehearsal. Because Pie needed some footage of that, the set dressers returned to arrange a few tables in the garage. Shots of an exclusive New York restaurant would be digitally added to the background afterwards.

It was getting quite late by the time the waiter¹⁴ set a plate of spaghetti and tofuballs in front of Jody, who was really Stig, and a thick slice of prime rib and mashed potatoes in front of Stig, who was really Jody. They discretely exchanged plates.

Just then, a telephone rang. Everyone patted their own pockets, before they looked around in that annoyed way that people do when a cellular telephone goes off in a restaurant and they are certain it is not their own.

Yugo blushed and pulled a thick black electronic device from his tool belt. "Excuse me," he said sheepishly. He nodded his head and whispered into the device. Then he pressed a blinking red button. All of the other diners stared at him.

¹⁴ The waiter was actually an actor named Mark McGavin. Like most actors, Mark worked between acting assignments in the food service industry. So, he was a waiter, who aspired to be an actor, playing a waiter. Critics later opined that Mark gave a nuanced and convincing performance in the role of 'waiter' on *Really Extremely Made Over Homes*. Mark has since appeared on *Dancing With The Stars*, where he finished in fourth place.

“I’m afraid we have a bit of an emergency,” he explained. “That was Santa Claus on the phone. It seems that he has been arrested.”

That was certainly an unexpected development, wasn’t it? To see how this development develops, turn to page 71.

You may also want to get another cookie and refill your milk glass before continuing.

SAM, WHO WAS REALLY IGGY, YUGO, Jody, who was really Stig and Alert walked along the right side of the railroad tracks towards *Basil's Tavern*. They reached 3rd street, and turned left. This took them from the right side of the tracks to the other side. The left side. The wrong side of the tracks.

They walked past a bum, a wino, a hobo, a drifter, and a vagrant. Sam, who was really Iggy, started to get nervous. Then they passed a tramp, and he got really nervous. You never can tell with tramps.

They reached the old brass doors of Basil's Tavern and pulled them open. It was so dark inside, that the darkness spilled out of the tavern, and bathed the night with blackness. Yugo extended his arm and carefully shuffled into the dark, narrow hall. A moment later, he bumped into a woman with a thick growth of hair on her upper lip, seated at a card table with a metal box on the top.

"Excuse me, sir," said Yugo.

The moustachioed woman had heard worse. "It's a five dollar cover," she snorted.

Yugo pulled out a small coin purse and placed twenty quarters on the table in five neat piles of four quarters each. The woman snorted again and then scooped them all into the metal box. The others paid their cover and they carefully manoeuvred past the card table and into the even darker room beyond.

They found a vacant table against the wall. A small candle in a glass bowl flickered in the center of the table, providing just enough light to illuminate the congealed stains that covered the table's surface. Yugo and Sam, who was really Iggy, lifted their elbows off the table.

A thin woman slid up behind Sam, who was really Iggy. She coughed loudly and then spoke in a deep gravelly voice that led Yugo to wonder whether she lived on a diet of vitamins and nicotine. "What'll you have, boys?" she rasped.

Yugo looked at the stains on the table. "Just a water, please," he said.

Sam, who was really Iggy said, "that sounds good. A water for me, too."

"It's a ten dollar minimum, honey," the thin woman croaked.

Yugo took another look at the table. "Just water, please," he repeated.

"Four waters it is, then," she said and disappeared into the blackness.

"I can't see a thing," said Sam, who was really Iggy. "Are they here?"

Yugo strained to look around the room, but he could only barely make out the next table. "I have no idea," he said.

Just then, the tinny speakers hanging in each corner of the tavern crackled and a voice barked, “gentlemen, put your hands together and give it up for Simoan!”¹⁵ An old rock and roll song pumped loudly through the scratchy speakers and a single spotlight stabbed through the velvet night of the tavern, lighting up the small stage in the center of the room. On the stage, an undernourished woman with long matted blonde hair and a skin to tattoo ratio of 1:7 gyrated against a rusted metal pole.

Sam, who was really Iggy’s eyes bugged out so far they looked like ping pong balls. “I didn’t know that you could get a tattoo there,” he said.

“Or a piercing,” added Yugo. He looked down at his water. It was even less appetizing than before.

Jody, who was really Stig, said, “I don’t care for the way this place objectifies women. Can we leave now?”

“Can you hear yourself?” asked Alert.

Jody, who was really Stig, shook his head. “I don’t know what is wrong with me,” he said. “I am just so moody today. But this place is making me really uncomfortable. Can we just go, please?”

“Sure, Jody,” said Sam, who was really Iggy. “I mean, Stig.”

They got up from their table and weaved carefully through the tavern to the exit. There was no sign of the stag party.

They reached the old brass doors and pushed them open. The night sky was so bright they were momentarily blinded. As they staggered out the exit, their hands over their eyes, a smelly man in tattered clothes crept up behind them.

“Gimme all your money,” he snarled. He pulled a large gleaming knife out from under his ragged coat.

Sam, who was really Iggy gasped. “It’s you! The tramp we saw before. I knew you never can tell with tramps.”

The tramp ignored him and waved his knife at Jody. “I’ll take your purse now, princess,” he sneered.

Jody, who was really Stig, said, “who are you calling princess?” He lowered his purse from his shoulder, then gripped the strap in his hand and swung it in a wide arc. It struck the tramp on his chin, and flipped his head back.

The tramp shook off the blow and said, “that will be enough of that. Give it to me now, or I’ll kill your little boy.” He grabbed Yugo in a headlock and waved his knife in front of the elf’s face. Yugo gulped loudly.

¹⁵ It is pronounced Si-mo-o-o-o-o-o-o-an.

Sam, who was really Iggy, looked desperately up and down the street. “I thought there were superheroes in this city,” he said. “Where are all the superheroes? There is never a superhero when you need one.”

Alert loosened his tie and unbuttoned his shirt collar, momentarily exposing the orange and red spandex uniform he wore under his suit. He quickly adjusted his tie and then he reached into his jacket and pulled out a large silver pistol. “Drop the knife, now! Drop it in the name of Justice!” He shouted it with such emphasis that Yugo could hear the capital ‘J’ in Justice.

The tramp just laughed. “Do your worst,” he growled. Yugo shut his eyes.

Alert squeezed the trigger on the large silver pistol. A stream of spaghetti noodles burst from the barrel and struck the tramp in the face. He staggered backwards and dropped his knife on the sidewalk. He coughed as he tried to pull noodles out of his mouth and nose. Yugo spun away and Jody, who was really Stig, scooped him up and hugged him.

“Are you all right?” he asked, a tear tracing a dark line of mascara down his cheek. “I was so worried about you.” He pulled Yugo close and hugged him tightly.

“I’m a little worried about Stig,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“Me too,” said Alert, slipping the spaghetti gun back into his jacket pocket.

“What should we do?” asked Sam, who was really Iggy. “Jody isn’t here. Where do we go now?”

If you have not gone to the *Howling Coyote* in the Old Quarter yet, you better look there next. To get there, go to page 57.

If you came from the *Howling Coyote* in the Old Quarter, you notice that it is starting to get light out and you decide to look for Stig, who is really Jody, in the room over Pie’s garage. You’ll find it on page 39.

IGGY, YUGO AND SAM RETREATED to the room over Pie's garage, away from the cameras of *Really Extremely Made Over Homes*, to plan their next move. Stig, Jody and the rest of their wedding party joined them there.

"What happened?" asked Sam, who was really Iggy.

Yugo raised his hands and said, "Santa Claus was making his annual delivery of toys. There are more children to reach and he starts a little earlier every year. He had just finished up at a house not far from here when he set off the burglar alarm. The police arrived and found him climbing up the chimney with a large bag of gifts on his back."

"So?" asked Iggy, who was really Sam. "What's wrong with that?"

"They've charged him with breaking and entering, trespassing and a bunch of other things." said Yugo. "He's being held in the cells downtown. He used his one phone call to call me. There's a bail hearing in an hour."

"That should be no problem," said Sam, who was really Iggy. "He is Santa Claus, after all."

"It is a big problem, Iggy," explained Yugo. "He was arrested leaving somebody's house, with a bag full of presents. There was an unregistered sled with a team of unlicensed livestock parked on the roof. It all looks very suspicious. And don't forget that Santa Claus is a bigger flight risk than most. I mean, he actually flies. Nope, I'm afraid that it does not look good at all."

"How not good are we talking about here?" asked Iggy, who was really Sam.

"Very not good," said Yugo. "These are serious charges. If Santa Claus can't get bail, he will have to stay in jail for months."

"That means ..." began Sam, who was really Iggy.

"... no Christmas," finished Iggy, who was really Sam.

"Exactly," said Yugo.

"What are we going to do?" asked Stig, who was really Jody.

"We can't leave Santa Claus in jail," said Jody, who was really Stig.

"We can't," agreed Yugo. "What we need is a lawyer. A good lawyer."

Sixteen eyes around the room swivelled in their sockets and focussed on Lance, who was adjusting the knot of his tie. He looked up, into eight faces staring at him.

"What?" he asked.

"We need a lawyer," said Jody, who was really Stig.

“A good lawyer,” said Stig, who was really Jody.

“I see,” said Lance. He chewed his lip thoughtfully. “I’m not that kind of a lawyer.”

“You mean you’re not a criminal lawyer?” asked Sam, who was really Iggy.

“No, I mean I’m not a good lawyer,” said Lance. “You said you needed a good lawyer. But, I’m not that kind of a lawyer. I’m really a bit of a ninny.”

“You must know something about getting bail?” said Iggy, who was really Sam.

“I’m sure I could look it up,” said Lance. “There are an awful lot of law books at my office. One of them must say something about bail. I could read some books, maybe spend a few hours noting up some cases ... ”

“We don’t have a few hours,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“I would have to have a few hours,” said Lance. “Quite a few hours, probably.” In his mind he was multiplying quite a few hours by his usual hourly rate and coming up with a very large number.

“Can’t we just skip the part about the books and the cases and just wing it?” asked Sam, who was really Iggy.

“Oh no, you can’t do that. You would have to be incredibly smart to do that,” said Lance. “And you would never get a proper fee without hours and hours and hours reading the books and the cases. No, I could not possibly do that without the books and the cases.”

“Incredibly smart, you say?” asked Iggy, who was really Sam. With that, sixteen eyes turned from Lance and trained their gaze on the smartest person in the room.

“Why are you all looking at me?” asked Yugo.

“You are incredibly smart,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“Smartest elf I know,” said Iggy, who was really Sam.

“Smartest elf anyone knows,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“Oh no,” said Yugo. “You’ve got the wrong guy. I don’t know anything about bail hearings or being a lawyer.”

“Being a lawyer is not so hard,” said Lance. “It’s mostly about having a good suit and good posture.”

Yugo shook his head. “How can I go before a judge and plead Santa’s case? I’m an elf, for goodness sakes. What judge is going to take an elf seriously?”

“You heard Lance,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

“You already have all the smarts,” said Iggy, who was really Sam. “All you need is a good suit and good posture.”

“Please, Yugo,” pleaded Stig, who was really Jody.

“You’re the only one who can do this,” said Jody, who was really Stig.

“But I don’t have a good suit,” said Yugo. “Just red and green velvet. And my posture is nothing special.” He sat deep in thought for a few moments. Then he reached over and picked up one of the controllers from the Pii. He passed it to Lance.

“Fancy a game?” he asked.

THE CHANGE, WHEN IT HAPPENED, was not what Yugo had expected. One moment he was in the game, watching leaves blow past in the digital breeze, then there was the flash of an explosion, followed by a wave of heat and noise. He felt a faint tug as he was pulled from the game and then the gentle comfort of settling back into his body. Even so, he knew at once that he was not himself.

He felt ... large. He stood up and the floor rushed away from him. Yugo felt dizzy as his head rose towards the ceiling. Is this how it felt to be a giant? His long arms ended in a set of enormous, though neatly manicured fingers. Yugo flexed his mammoth biceps experimentally. He felt as though he could wrap his arms around the entire world. He blinked, and looked around the room through a new set of eyes. He quickly got used to seeing the world through Lance’s designer glasses; Lance only wore them for appearances -- the lenses were plain glass.

He set the controller down on the table. It felt like a long way. The table, the floor and his very own feet seemed to be far, far away. He spoke, surprised that his words came out in a velvet baritone, and not his usual elfin chirp.

“How do I look?”

“You look tall,” said Iggy, who was really Sam.

“Excellent posture,” added Sam, who was really Iggy.

“You’ve got it all,” said Iggy, who was really Sam. “The suit, the posture and the smarts. This will be as easy as cake.”

“Don’t you mean as easy as pie?” asked Sam, who was really Iggy.

Iggy, who was really Sam, shrugged. “I like cake,” he said.

“We’d better get going,” said Sam, who was really Iggy. “The bail hearing is going to start in a few minutes.”

"You're right," said Lance, who was really Yugo. He adjusted his cuffs carefully. "We don't have much time. Do I look okay?"

"You look great," said Iggy, who was really Sam. "Seriously, you do. How many times do we have to keep telling you that?"

Lance, who was really Yugo, smiled. "I'll let you know when I've heard it enough," he quipped.

Sam, who was really Iggy, squeezed his temples with Sam's thick fingers. He had not expected his friend to turn completely into a lawyer quite so quickly.

Lance, who was really Yugo, examined his cuticles. He broke wind loudly. He sniffed, but smelled nothing at all. He nodded. He was ready, now. "Let's go," he said. "Let's go save Christmas."

"About time we had a little excitement and adventure on this trip," said Iggy, who was really Sam.

"That's funny, you don't usually care for the excitement and adventure that much," said Sam, who was really Iggy.

"I know," sighed Iggy, who was really Sam. "But I'm just not myself these days." With that, the three elves, one of whom was over six feet tall and dressed in a two thousand dollar silk suit, scampered down the stairs and out to the snowmobile.

Five pairs of eyes swivelled back to look at the one elf, who was still sitting on the sofa. He looked desperately sad and alone.

Yugo, who was really Lance, tugged at his green tunic. He was used to a finer fabric and the coarse velvet chafed terribly. Even worse, it lacked the insignia of any major designer. He ran a calloused thumb through his thick black moustache; the absence of conditioner was appalling. He shuffled his small feet. He dared not remove his pointy-toed boots. He just knew that he was going to need a pedicure, stat.

It had not always been easy for Lance, being the best looking guy he knew. But he was certain that being a three-foot tall elf, with bandy legs and pointy ears, was going to be a whole lot harder.

Yugo, who was really Lance, was happy to do his part to save Christmas and all, but who was going to save his Christmas?

LLANCE, WHO WAS REALLY YUGO, struggled to squeeze behind the wheel of the snowmobile. The driver's seat had been custom built for his elf sized frame, it was never meant to hold anyone of Lance's stature. He pressed

a yellow lever and the seat moved slowly backwards until Sam, who was really Iggy began squealing in the back row,

“Sorry,” said Lance, who was really Yugo. He pulled the seat forward a little. His long legs were bent on either side of the steering wheel and his head was wedged against the ceiling. He hunched over so he could see out the front window and then pressed a flashing red button. The lithium fusion engines started up with a soft rumble. He lowered the emergency brake and guided the snowmobile out into the quiet city streets.

“Let’s roll,” he said, and pulled back on a black lever. The snowmobile lurched forward and headed away from Pie’s garage. Lance, who was really Yugo, pressed down on the accelerator pedal, forgetting for a moment how large his feet were in their polished Italian loafers. The snowmobile tore down the road and careened around a corner on four wheels. This was a much more dangerous example of careening than it might appear, as the snowmobile had eight wheels in all, with four on each side.

“Slow down!” shouted Iggy, who was really Sam. “You’re going to get us killed!”

Lance, who was really Yugo, eased off only slightly on the accelerator pedal and expertly threaded the speeding snowmobile through traffic. He veered into the adjacent lane to get around a slow moving red Dodge, then pulled back into his lane just in time to avoid a collision with a little white Honda coming from the other direction.

Red and blue lights began flashing in the rear view mirror. A moment later, the sound of a siren could be heard above the perfect tones of the snowmobile’s icosaphonic surround sound system.

“You’re going to have to slow down now,” said Sam, who was really Iggy. “We can’t afford any more trouble with the law.”

“We don’t have time for this,” grunted Lance, who was really Yugo.

“Just make us invisible or something then, so we can get away,” said Iggy, who was really Sam.

Lance, who was really Yugo, shook his head. He had never been able to develop a perfect invisibility device. He’s tried coating the snowmobile in highly reflective paint and using prisms to bend light waves around it, but it always looked like a bad special effect. No matter what he tried, there was always a smudge of a snowmobile left behind.

“I don’t have an invisibility device,” he said. He looked out the side window. The police car was pulling up beside the snowmobile and waving it over.

Lance, who was really Yugo, flipped an orange toggle. He pressed down on the accelerator again and the snowmobile sped away from the police car. The siren stopped and the flashing lights dimmed.

“What happened?” asked Sam, who was really Iggy.

“You said you don’t have an invisibility device,” said Iggy, who was really Sam.

“We’re not invisible, just something like it,” said Lance, who was really Yugo. When he flipped the orange toggle, a bank of projectors and reflective panels rose out of the roof of the snowmobile and created the illusion that the snowmobile was over three hundred feet tall. Rather than make the snowmobile invisible, Lance, who was really Yugo, had made it the most visible object in the city.

And that is exactly why neither the police, nor anyone else on the road could see it. It was simply too big. There are limitations to how much the human brain can process at one time. The sight of a flying snowmobile driven by elves already required a considerable suspension of disbelief by its viewers. The sight of a thirty story tall snowmobile made too great a demand on the imagination. It was easier to see nothing at all. And so, by making the snowmobile gigantic, Lance, who was really Yugo, had made it invisible.

The enormous snowmobile skidded to a stop in front of the courthouse, an old brick building with gleaming brass doors. “Come on,” said Lance, who was really Yugo. “Let’s go get Santa Claus.” Iggy and Sam, who were really each other, hopped out of the snowmobile and then helped pry Lance, who was really Yugo, from the driver’s seat.

Sam, who was really Iggy, held out a large leather briefcase. “You’ll need one of these,” he said to Lance, who was really Yugo. He reached down and took the briefcase, which he found to be surprisingly light.

“It’s empty,” he said.

“I know,” said Sam, who was really Iggy. “It’s only for appearances.” Lance, who was really Yugo, nodded and then led the other two elves up the marble steps and through the brass doors.

They walked across a wide tiled lobby to a desk manned by a police officer. His blonde hair was cut so short it was not immediately clear he had any hair at all. He had a bushy blonde moustache and, even though he was inside, he wore a pair of reflective sunglasses. “Can I help you?” he asked as they approached.

Lance, who was really Yugo, pulled a business card from his vest pocket and snapped it onto the desk. “Lance Boyle, barrister, solicitor and attorney-at-law. Here to speak to the Claus matter.”

The policeman picked up a clipboard and flipped through a sheaf of papers. He ran his finger down a page at the back and snorted. "You represent that guy who thinks he's Santa Claus?"

"He is Santa Claus," blurted out Sam, who was really Iggy.

"Sure he is," said the policeman. "And who are these children with you? We don't usually allow children in court."

"They aren't children," said Lance, who was really Yugo, in his barrister's baritone. "They are elves. Helper elves."

"Darn right," said Iggy, who was really Sam.

"Elves?" The police officer glared at Iggy, who was really Sam, through his reflective sunglasses. "Can't say that I care much for elves."

Lance, who was really Yugo, leaned over the policeman's desk. "I am indeed retained on behalf of Mr. Claus," he said. "It would be a kindness to me if you would direct me to his bail hearing."

The policeman snorted again. "It's upstairs in courtroom six," he said. "But you're wasting your time. He's not getting out tonight."

"Oh really?" asked Lance, who was really Yugo. He raised a neatly plucked eyebrow nearly an inch. "What makes you say that?"

The policeman shook his head. "He was caught red handed breaking and entering. He's going to do hard time."

"Perhaps we should let the judge decide," replied Lance, who was really Yugo.

"There is no judge," said the policeman. "Judges don't work on Christmas Eve."

"No judge?" said Lance, who was really Yugo. "But then who is presiding at the bail hearing?"

The policeman set down his clipboard. He took off his sunglasses and hung them from his shirt collar. "That would be me," he said.

Lance, who was really Yugo, gulped.

"Come on then, mister big shot barrister, solicitor and attorney-at-law," said the policeman. "Let's go get this over with."

He led the three elves up the stairs and into courtroom six. "All rise, court is now in session, petty constable Fred Sparks, presiding," the police officer called out. He was the only person on duty that Christmas Eve, and had to take care of all the usual courtroom tasks by himself. He walked over to a door at the side of the courtroom and unlocked it, before taking his place at a large table at the back.

Santa Claus shuffled through the open door and sat down on a folding chair. He was dressed in an orange jump suit instead of his familiar red fur coat. His wrists and ankles were bound in heavy steel chains. His eyes twinkled, merrily, when he caught sight of the elves. "Where's Yugo?" he mouthed in the direction of Iggy, who was really Sam. He pointed at Lance, who was really Yugo. Santa Claus nodded.

PC Sparks opened a folder and read out, "Santa Claus, if that is your real name, you stand charged with breaking and entering, trespass, burglary, theft, fleeing the scene of a crime, eight counts of possession of unlicensed reindeer, operating a flying conveyance without lodging a flight plan, possession of stolen property and vagrancy. This hearing is to decide whether you will be released from jail pending your trial, as unlikely as that seems.

"You know, some people say that it is unfair to keep a person in jail before they have been judged guilty of a crime," he said. "I am not one of those people. People get out on bail far too easily, I say. Even people who have been charged with very serious crimes. Sometimes they are free for years before they face a trial for their crimes. There are a lot of dangerous people out there, Mr. Boyle. And dangerous people like Mr. Claus here should be in jail."

Petty constable Sparks turned back to his papers. "So, Mr. Boyle, have you anything to say before I send Mr. Claus back to his cell?"

Lance, who was really Yugo, stood up and cleared his throat. "I most certainly do, I most certainly do."

"Well, make it quick, Mr. Boyle, I don't have all night," said PC Sparks. This was, in truth, an untruth. He did have all night. His shift did not end until the following morning.

Lance, who was really Yugo, stood up and paced along the back of his desk. "Well sir, the man before you is none other than Santa Claus. You have to let him go, he has a great deal of important work to do tonight."

"I'm sure that he does," said PC Sparks. "But, this is the fourth Santa Claus we've picked up tonight. What makes him different from the others?"

"He does have helper elves," replied Lance, who was really Yugo. He gestured towards Iggy and Sam.

Petty constable Sparks blinked a few times. "Right. Elves. That is something, I suppose." The very thought of elves seemed to fluster him. He shook his head and said, "What do you say to the fact that Mr. Claus was caught in the act of breaking and entering?"

"Ah, that is where you are mistaken," said Lance, who was really Yugo. He hooked his thumbs in his suspenders. "As you will see from the

particulars of this case, my client was apprehended as he was leaving the subject residence via the chimney. That, I submit, is breaking and *exiting*. And that is not a crime.” Lance, who was really Yugo, smiled triumphantly. Iggy and Sam exchanged a high five behind his back.

“Nice try,” said PC Sparks. “But I am sure you are familiar with the Supreme Court decision of *R v. Rupprecht*, where the court applied the Roman law maxim *unus vadum penetro pro licet exitus*: he who exits must enter. And anyway, there are all sorts of other charges here. What about the bag of toys?”

“Those were all the property of Mr. Claus. *Vos non rapio ut quod vos habas*: you cannot steal that which you own.” Lance’s tongue was as nimble as Yugo’s fingers. He had no idea where these words were coming from. Iggy, who was really Sam, gave Sam, who was really Iggy, a thumb up.

“True enough, Mr Boyle. But how can you say that these parcels were the property of Mr. Claus when each of the presents in his sack had a tag with someone else’s name on it?” Sam, who was really Iggy, winced.

“I’m sorry, Mr Boyle,” continued PC Sparks. “But I don’t see how I can let Mr. Claus out of jail. He is obviously a threat to public order.”

Lance, who was really Yugo, stared ahead blankly. He turned and looked at Santa Claus. Unless he came up with something, he would be wearing that orange jumpsuit for months and maybe years. Santa Claus smiled at him and winked.

Yugo knew it was all up to him. It was clear that petty constable Sparks would not be swayed by the logic of his argument. He was going to have to try a different approach. Perhaps he could appeal to him another way. Lance, who was really Yugo, snapped his finger and turned back to PC Sparks.

“You are correct, of course. Each of the packages in my client’s bag bore the name of another person. Because each of those parcels is a gift which my client made especially for that person and which my client was in the process of delivering when he was arrested.” Lance, who was really Yugo’s voice rose. He raised his finger and said, “and one of those presents in that bag has the name ‘PC Sparks’ written on it. And if my client is not allowed to make bail, that present will never be delivered.” He buttoned up his silk suit and sat down.

Petty constable Sparks had gone pale. “I see, I see,” he muttered. “You have shed some new light on this difficult case, Mr. Boyle. It would seem that Mr. Claus has some important and unfinished business to attend to. Perhaps it would be prudent to permit him a chance to finish that important business. I’ve decided to grant Mr. Claus bail, after all.”

Iggy, who was really Sam, pumped his fist in the air. Lance, who was really Yugo, let out a long breath.

“You did it, Yugo, you did it!” shouted Sam, who was really Iggy. He slapped Lance, who was really Yugo on the back, while he danced an elfish jig. Then he sat down himself. His feet were still very sore.

Petty constable Sparks walked over to Santa Claus and unlocked the handcuffs. “You’re free to go,” he said.

Santa Claus rubbed his wrists. “I always knew that you were a good boy, Freddy,” he said. “I’ll be sure to leave a little something extra for you in your stocking this year.” He stood up and followed Iggy, Yugo and Sam out of the courthouse. They burst through the brass doors and ran down the marble steps to the snowmobile.

Santa Claus flipped open an old pocket watch. “Oh dear, look at the time,” he said. He tucked the watch back into his pocket, then put two fingers to his lips and whistled. A moment later, the sound of sleigh bells rang through the night. The ringing gradually got louder until a flying sled, towed by eight tiny reindeer appeared over the roof of the courthouse. It dropped down and slid to a stop beside Santa Claus.

“I’ve lost so much time,” he said to the elves. “I’m going to need your help.”

“What can we do?” asked Lance, who was really Yugo.

Santa Claus walked around his sled. He pulled two large sacks from the back and brought them to the snowmobile.

“Deliver these,” he said. “Everything’s labelled. It should all be very straight forward.”

Sam, who was really Iggy, gathered up the sacks and loaded them into the snowmobile. Lance, who was really Yugo, revved the engine.

“And one other thing,” added Santa Claus. “See if you can find a store that’s still open and pick up something for Freddy Sparks.”

“You don’t have anything for him?” asked Iggy, who was really Sam.

“Ho ho ho,” Santa Claus laughed and shook his head. “Freddy Sparks is a little twerp. And he’s a bit of a moron. For goodness sakes, you got me out of prison by bribing him with his own Christmas present. He hasn’t been on the nice list for years. But I promised him a little something, so see what you can do.”

With that, Santa Claus put a finger at the side of his nose and leapt into his sled. He whistled again and the sled slowly rose into the night sky. He snapped the reins and was gone in a blur of red.

“I guess we had better get going, then,” said Lance, who was really Yugo. “It’s going to be a long night.”

IT WAS A LONG NIGHT. It was not the first time that they had helped Santa Claus complete his annual deliveries, but that did not make it any easier. There were thousands of presents to stack under thousands of Christmas trees. There were thousands of stockings to stuff and thousands of cookies to be eaten. Sam did his best with the cookies, but Iggy's body was not really suited to the task.

They stopped for a minute at an all night convenience store, where Sam, who was really Iggy, picked up an insulated travel mug¹⁶ and a pair of sunglasses for petty constable Fred Sparks. These were slipped neatly under the constable's little plastic Christmas tree, one of thousands of other little plastic Christmas trees the elves saw that night.

They visited Alert's house, where Lance, who was really Yugo, slipped a pair of red pleather gloves under a tree decorated with ornaments in the shape of comic book heroes. They left a jumbo sized tube of denture tree for Grampa Les at Glenn's apartment, a set of brass carburetor pliers for Glenn at Herschel's house, a big floppy chef's hat with the name 'HersChell' embroidered on it in red thread at Rudy's mother's house and a box of multi-sided die for Rudy in one of Grampa Les' worn stockings.

The sun was just beginning to rise when they parked the snowmobile in front of Stig and Jody's house and then tumbled into bed. Lance, who was really Yugo, had to sleep on the sofa. He was far too tall to fit into Yugo's little bunk. It made no difference; he was exhausted and was asleep the moment he closed his eyes.

IT SEEMED THAT ONLY MINUTES HAD PASSED before the elves were awoken by a man with a bullhorn.

"Move that snowmobile!" bellowed Pie Tenninate. Lance, who was really Yugo, rubbed his bleary eyes and looked out the window. Pie was standing right next to the glass, bullhorn in hand. A large crowd was gathered behind him.

"Move that snowmobile!" Pie and the crowd shouted again. He lowered his bullhorn and rapped on the driver's window. Lance, who was really Yugo, rolled it down. Pie lifted his bullhorn and leaned in. "Seriously guys, you have to move this snowmobile. We need to get a bus in here," he shouted.

¹⁶ It is a near certainty that any gift of an insulated travel mug was purchased in the final shopping hours before Christmas, often while on the way to the recipient's house for Christmas dinner.



Lance, who was really Yugo, yawned and nodded. He started up the snowmobile and drove it down the block. Then Pie shouted directions through his bullhorn to a large bus, which pulled into its place, concealing Stig's house from the cameras of *Really Extremely Made Over Homes*.

Yugo manoeuvred Lance's body to the rear of the snowmobile and woke up Iggy and Sam. "Happy Christmas, guys," he said.

Iggy, who was really Sam, stretched. "What's so happy about it?" he asked. "I'm still in this terrible skinny body. When do I get my proper self back?"

"Soon," said Lance, who was really Yugo. "I'm working on it. I don't like being Lance anymore than you like being Iggy. I'm sure Iggy doesn't like being Sam at all."

Iggy, who was really Sam, pouted. "And just what's wrong with being Sam?" he asked. "Who wouldn't want to be Sam? Being Sam is the best."

Sam, who was really Iggy, was still struggling with the reluctance of Sam's body to get out of bed in the morning. He rolled out of his bunk and landed on the floor with a loud thump. "Ow," he said.

"Hey," shouted Iggy, who was really Sam. "Be careful with that. I expect my body back in the same shape you found it."

"It couldn't be in any worse shape," yawned Sam, who was really Iggy. He pulled a blanket off of the bottom bunk and curled up with it on the floor.

"Get up, Iggy," said Lance, who was really Yugo. "The show's about to start." He turned a green dial and a screen dropped down from the ceiling of the snowmobile. He pressed a yellow button and a crisp high definition picture appeared on the screen. It was Pie Tenninate, hollering into his bullhorn as the opening credits of *Really Extremely Made Over Homes* scrolled over him.

"Today, on a very special episode of *Really Extremely Made Over Homes*, we'll meet Stig and Jody, a young couple whose lives have been touched by tragedy." Violin music swelled as Pie explained how Stig's house was destroyed in a home invasion robbery on Christmas Day. Then Pie showed the tape he had made of his stunt crew smashing the house apart. It looked too real to be true. He led into the first commercial with the tearful statement that "it was all over, we aren't going to make it." By the time the program returned from commercial, Pie had overcome the crisis of the termites and his team was busily building and decorating the new house.

"Come on, we have to get ready," said Lance, who was really Yugo.

"Ready for what?" asked Iggy, who was really Sam. He had moved from the floor to the couch, where he was watching *Really Extremely Made Over Homes* while eating a large bowl of candied rutabagas.

"Stig and Jody's wedding," said Lance, who was really Yugo. "It is going to be shown live in the second half of the show. "We need to get over there." Lance, who was really Yugo, had quickly dressed in a tidy black tuxedo, with a white rose pinned to the lapel.

"Why are you dressed like that?" asked Sam, who was really Iggy.

"I'm the best man," said Lance, who was really Yugo. "I mean Lance is. Which means that I am."

"I wanted to be the best man," said Iggy, who was really Sam.

"This tuxedo won't fit you," said Lance, who was really Yugo.

Iggy, who was really Sam, nodded. "I suppose you're right. I'm a winter. I look best in red and green."

The three elves left the snowmobile, walked up the street and joined the crowd, which was standing across from the big bus parked in front of Stig's house. It was an improbably big bus, so big that it strained the imagination of everyone there to see it at all. Pie Tenninate stood in front of it, fidgeting impatiently with the volume control on his bullhorn. When *Really Extremely Made Over Homes* came back from this commercial break, it would switch to a live broadcast.

All of Stig and Jody's family, friends and neighbours were in the crowd. Jody's sister Rhonda was there, along with her rambunctious boys Ronnie, Donnie and Little Jack. So was Grampa Les, who was really Rudy, Rudy, who was really Herschel, and Herschel, who was really Glenn. Glenn, who was really Grampa Les, was standing in the front row, holding Mrs. Hawkins' hand. A bearded man in a red jacket stood in the back row.

The elves took their places beside Alert and Yugo, who was really Lance. He looked lovingly at Lance, who was really Yugo, making everyone in the crowd a little uncomfortable.

"You look very handsome in that tuxedo," breathed Yugo, who was really Lance.

Lance, who was really Yugo, just nodded. "Thanks," he said. Everyone in the crowd became a little more uncomfortable.

"We're about to go live," Pie shouted through his bullhorn.

A murmur went through the crowd, then production assistant said, "everybody quiet please." The crowd stood in silence. The production assistant held up her open hand, and then lowered her fingers one by one as she counted down, "four ... three ... two ... now everybody make some noise, we're going live!"

At the top of the main camera, a red light came on and the crowd clapped and cheered. The production assistant stood behind the camera as it panned across the crowd, urging them to wave and cheer more loudly. Then the camera turned. The production assistant scrambled to get out of the shot as it zoomed in on Pie.

Pie looked into the camera like he was staring into the eyes of a loved one and then shouted, "welcome back to *Really Extremely Made Over Homes!* We're coming to you live! And right behind that bus is Stig and Jody's new house!" He waved his bullhorn free arm at the gigantic bus. "Stig and Jody have spent the last week at luxury island report," Pie loudly lied. "And now they're back!"

The crowd parted to allow a long white limousine to pass through. It pulled up parallel to the big bus. The rear door open and Jody, who was really Stig, stepped out. He was dressed in a long lacy wedding gown and held a bouquet of flowers in his right hand. He walked unsteadily on his satin heels towards Pie. Jody, who was really Stig, followed him. She was dressed on a black tuxedo with tails and a lacy white shirt. She adjusted her white bowtie and then walked gracefully over to join Pie and Stig.

Pie leaned into Jody, who was really Stig and placed his bullhorn within an inch of his pretty little nose. "Tell me Jody, are you ready to see your

new house?" He shouted. Jody, who was really Stig, just nodded dumbly.

"How about you?" Pie shouted to the crowd. They clapped enthusiastically, but that was not good enough for Pie. He nodded to his soundman and hidden loudspeakers supplemented the applause with crowd noise recorded at a football game. "Are you ready to see Stig and Jody's new house?"

The crowd waved and cheered. "Go Beavers go!" roared the hidden speakers.

The camera swung back to Pie. "Then let's get this bus out of here. Get outta here, bus!" Pie shouted the program's catchphrase at the bus driver.

"Get outta here bus!" echoed the crowd.

"Go Beavers go!" chanted the hidden speakers.

"Get outta here, bus!" Pie screamed again, breaking several local noise bylaws. Sparks flew from the end of his bullhorn. The bus started up, coughing a thick cloud of exhaust and then slowly pulled away.

Pie turned to look at the house. The smoke from the exhaust slowly cleared. The crowd made an appreciative "ooooh" and then clapped loudly.

"Go Beavers go!" the hidden speakers called.

The megaphone fell from Pie's hand and clattered onto the pavement. His mouth gaped open. He tried to say something, but for once, words failed him.

"Oh Stig, it's perfect!" cried Stig, who was really Jody. She threw her long hairy arms around him.

And it was perfect. Yugo's revisions to Pie's blueprints had been carried out exactly. At the end of a winding sidewalk made of peppermint candy cobblestones stood a perfect little Christmas cottage. The fourth floor, the giant brass doors and the marble columns were all gone. In their place was a cosy little house, with soft curving walls the colour of eggnog. The simple wooden plank door was surrounded on either side by candy cane pillars. Beneath each little shuttered window was a flower box filled with bright red poinsettias. The green tiled roof was peaked with gables, on the topmost of these a gleaming weathervane pointed to the North Pole. Behind it, white clouds gently wafted from the brick chimney. An electric train whirred around tracks that lined the rain gutters. Evergreen trees wrapped in tinsel and topped with glittering gold stars towered over the house on all sides.

Pie blinked and gulped like a guppy.

“Go Beavers go!” bellowed the hidden speakers.

Stig, who was really Jody, jumped up and down excitedly. “Can we go inside?” she asked.

Pie blinked again and nodded mutely. Stig, who was really Jody, raced up the peppermint candy cobblestones and pulled open the front door. A production team carrying hand held video cameras and boom microphones scrambled to keep up with her. Jody, who was really Stig, followed slowly behind, carefully navigating the cobblestones in his satin high heels.

The dining room had been completely restored, with all of the broken Christmas dishes lovingly glued back together and stacked on an antique hutch. She ran down a hallway with red and green striped wallpaper into a sitting room, where a fire glowed in a stone fireplace. Two stockings hung from the chimney with care, one decorated with a stylized letter J, the other with an S. In the corner stood a Christmas tree, decorated with popcorn strings and real burning wax candles.

The carpet was a thick white pile that sparkled like new fallen snow. Jody skipped across it and opened the door into the next room, which was a little workshop, with tiny hand tools arranged on the miniature workbench. “Look Stig!” she reached for Jody, who was really Stig’s little hand and pulled him along after her. “A little playroom for our children!” A tear slid down her rough cheek.

A few feet away Sam, who was really Iggy, dug his elbow into Lance, who was really Yugo’s thigh. He just smiled and shrugged.

Pie had recovered his composure, as well as his bullhorn. “Let me show you my special project!” he shouted. He led them through the main bedroom, with its big bed in the shape of a sleigh, and pulled a hidden lever. A bookcase slid aside to reveal the two fire poles that led to the basement cavern.

“What in the world is that?” asked Jody who was really Stig.

“It’s your very own secret subterranean lair!” Pie shouted proudly.

“A secret subterranean lair?” asked Stig, who was really Jody, incredulously.

“That’s right,” beamed Pie. “Your very own secret subterranean lair!” At the back of the crowd, Alert’s jaw dropped with envy.

“What in the world are we going to do with a secret subterranean lair?” she asked.

Pie smiled. “I’ll tell you what you are going to do!” he hollered. “You’re going to get married there!”

“I’m going to get married in a cave?” asked Stig, who was really Jody.

“That’s right!” Pie spun and turned to the camera. He winked and pointed. “Right after this commercial break. Don’t you go away!” The hidden speakers pumped out the theme music for *Really Extremely Made Over Homes*.

Millions of television sets faded to commercial as Stig, who was really Jody bawled, “I don’t want to get married in a cave!”

PIE SPENT THE NEXT THREE MINUTES frantically bustling Jody, Stig, their wedding party, their families, friends and the crew of *Really Extremely Made Over Homes* down the two fire poles and into the secret subterranean lair. Dozens of white folding chairs had been arranged in neat rows, with a narrow aisle up the middle, leading to a lacy white arch.

Reverend Blugenes untangled his pastoral gown from the fire pole and made his way to the front of the lair. He quickly organized Jody, who was really Stig, Lance, who was really Yugo, Rudy, who was really Herschel and Alert, who was still just Alert, into an even line.

Stig, who was really Jody, leaned over to Lance, who was really Yugo, and whispered, “I’m glad you’re my best man, Yugo. Sure, Lance looks amazing in a tuxedo, but he’s just such a ninny.”

Yugo, who was really Lance, took Jody’s large calloused hand in his and smiled. “We wouldn’t have missed it for the world,” he said.

The *Really Extremely Made Over Homes* theme played again and Pie shouted at the camera, “we’re back, in the secret¹⁷ subterranean lair beneath Stig and Jody’s new house! They’re about to get married live here on *Really Extremely Made Over Homes!*”

The camera panned over the wedding guests as an organ player pounded out a rhythmic tune. “What is that?” whispered Stig, who was really Jody.

“And here to sing Jody down the aisle is Miss Whitney Queers, performing her Christmas number one hit, *Gimme Somethin’!*” yelled Pie. The shot shifted to Whitney Queers, dressed only in a white sequined bikini with matching wedding veil, who started mouthing the words “gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’, gimme somethin’ ...”

¹⁷ With an estimated audience of nearly 100 million viewers, the only people who did not learn the secret of Stig and Jody’s “secret” subterranean lair that day were people who lived in caves, themselves.

The flower girl walked slowly down the aisle, spreading poinsettia petals behind her. Jody's sister Rhonda followed, leading the other two bridesmaids up the aisle with a smirk on her face. They reached the front as Whitney reached a crescendo, "'gimme somethin', gimme somethin', gimme somethin', gimme somethin' *more!*'"

At the end of the aisle, Jody, who was really Stig, let out a big sigh. "Let's get this over with," he said. He nodded at Iggy, who was really Sam, Yugo, who was really Lance and Sam, who was really Iggy. The three elves were dressed in their best red and green velvet, with sprigs of mistletoe pinned to their jackets. Lance had pressed a crease into Yugo's leggings that was so sharp you could cut paper snowflakes with it.

Jody, who was really Stig, offered his arm to Sam, who was really Iggy while the other two elves gathered up the train of his gown.

"I still don't see why Iggy gets to give away the groom," said Iggy, who was really Sam.

"We've been through this, Sam," said Sam, who was really Iggy.

"Iggy won fairly," said Yugo, who was really Lance. They had settled who would walk Stig down the aisle with a spirited game of icicle-cocoa-fruitcake, best two throws out of three.

"I still say that cocoa melts icicle," said Iggy, who was really Sam.

"You know the rules," said Sam, who was really Iggy. "Icicle freezes cocoa. Cocoa soaks fruitcake. Fruitcake breaks icicle."

"My Gran's fruitcake could break anything," said Lance, who was really Yugo.

Jody, who was really Stig, slipped his hand into Sam, who was really Iggy's arm and took his first step down the aisle. Whitney Queers shook her hips and, somehow, lip-synched even more loudly than before. They reached the front of the cave. Reverend Blugenes smiled warmly and steered Stig, who was really Jody next to Jody, who was really Stig. She smiled at him with his own dark eyes.

"Welcome everyone," began Reverend Blugenes. "We are gathered here this afternoon, to join Stig and Jody in holy matrimony." He spoke for several minutes about the institution and sacrament of marriage until he caught sight of Pie, standing a few feet out of the shot and gesturing to him to speed up. *Really Extremely Made Over Homes* was scheduled to go off the air at any moment.

Reverend Blugenes took the hint. He had overseen forty weddings in a single day once; he knew how to move things along. He quickly steered Stig and Jody through their vows, swapped rings and invited all and sundry to speak now, or forever hold their peace.

No one spoke, and then the Reverend Blugenes said, "I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Stig, who was really Jody, leaned forward. She was going to have to kiss him this time, everyone was expecting it. It felt strange, looking down into her own eyes, like looking into a mirror with no glass. She closed her eyes and bent down, pressing Stig's lips against her own. It was not so bad, really, she thought. She was really kissing Stig, after all. His lips were fuller and softer than she was used to, but it was still Stig. Her Stig.

She felt a tingle in her belly, like she sometimes did when Stig kissed her. Her knees quivered and she opened her mouth a little. She reached up and traced her hand along Stig's rough cheek, then ran her fingers gently through his short hair. She opened her eyes and looked up into Stig's.

She looked up.

Into *Stig's* eyes.

"It's you," she said.

Stig looked down at her through his own eyes. "It's you," he said.

"You," she said.

"You," he said.

"You."

"You."

"You."

"You."

The closing theme of *Really Extremely Made Over Homes* rang through the cave. Jody spun and flung her bouquet into the crowd. It tumbled through the air and fell into the lap of Mrs. Hawkins. She picked it up and looked over to Glenn, who was really Grampa Les, and raised her eyebrow.

The camera zoomed in on Pie, who wrapped his arm around Whitney Queers and shouted his appreciation for his sponsors. The red light on the main camera turned off. Pie set down his bullhorn. "That's a wrap," he said softly. *Really Extremely Made Over Homes* was in the can for another week. He would pick his megaphone up again then.

The production crew was pulling down lights and reeling in cable. Pie walked past Stig and Jody, who were still embracing at the front of the cave while the key grip¹⁸ pulled down the wedding arch.

“Great show, kids, just great,” he said.

“Thank you so much,” exclaimed Jody, but Pie did not hear her. He had already left the set. The rest of the crew of *Really Extremely Made Over Homes* was making their way laboriously up the fire poles with their video and sound equipment. Within a few minutes, they were gone. They left nothing behind but hooks and some wire.

Sam, who was really Iggy, turned to Jody. “What happened?”

“I’m me, again!” said Jody. “And Stig is Stig.”

Stig nodded. “We switched back,” he said.

“When we kissed,” said Jody.

“That’s all it took,” said Stig.

“Just a kiss,” added Jody.

Lance, who was really Yugo, said, “of course. Why didn’t I think of that. It’s so simple.”

“What’s so simple?” asked Iggy, who was really Sam.

“The kiss,” explained Lance, who was really Yugo. “When you kiss somebody, and I mean when you *really* kiss somebody, your souls touch. That’s the key. When Stig and Jody kissed, their souls touched and that helped them find their way back into their proper bodies.”

“Is that all we have to do?” asked Sam, who was really Iggy.

“Just kiss?” asked Iggy, who was really Sam.

“I can do that,” said Sam, who was really Iggy.

Iggy, who was really Sam, looked at Sam, who was really Iggy, disdainfully. “I suppose I could do that,” he said. He leaned over and pecked Iggy on his puffy cheek. He looked down at his hands. “Nothing happened,” he said.

“You have to kiss him on the lips,” said Lance, who was really Yugo.

Iggy, who was really Sam, glared at Lance, who was really Yugo. “This had better work,” he muttered. He pulled Iggy’s face up to his and kissed him full on the lips.

¹⁸ The key grip is the fellow who is in charge of the grips. Grips are crewmembers who move equipment and assemble it on the set. Some other people you might meet on a television or movie set are the gaffer, who is the chief electrician. The best boy is the gaffer’s assistant. Foley artists create sound effects. Wranglers are in charge of the animals, including termites. You’re welcome.

“Nothing’s happening,” he slurred.

Lance, who was really Yugo, bent over the two osculating elves. “You have to kiss him like you really mean it. Try slipping him the tongue.”

Sam, who was really Iggy, wrapped his pudgy arms around Iggy, who was really Sam and pulled him close. It was awfully strange kissing Sam this way. Still, they were friends, and even though he was an unbearable curmudgeon at times, Iggy cared very much for Sam. And Sam was very fond of Iggy. They held their kiss for a moment, and then Sam felt a tickle in his belly.

His big belly. Sam broke off the kiss and wriggled out of Iggy’s embrace. “I’m back!” he shouted. He placed his hands on his prodigious gut. “Oh how I’ve missed you!” He shook his arms and legs to make sure it was real. He wiggled his feet. They were his own real feet. And they hurt terribly.

Iggy wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I never knew you were such a good kisser, Sam,” he said.

Sam glared at him. “We will never speak of this again,” he said.

“Agreed,” said Iggy.

Lance, who was really Yugo, clapped his manicured hands together. “All right, who’s next?” he asked. He picked up Yugo, who was really Lance, and kissed him tenderly. On the other side of the cave, Glenn kissed Herschel while Grampa Les necked with Rudy.

Jody smiled and looked up at Stig. “It sure gets weird around here at Christmas,” she said.

“It sure does,” said Stig. And he took his bride into his own arms and kissed her again.

And they lived happily ever after.

EPILOGUE

It was two weeks after Christmas and Santa Claus was sorting through his mail. He did not get very many letters in January. He split open the thick vellum envelope with his letter opener and pulled out a single page. It was from Lance Boyle:

<i>Padd & Gowdge LLP</i> <i>Barristers, Solicitors and Notaries Public</i>	
Attention:	Mr. S. Claus
To:	All services rendered in connection with your bail hearing, including telephone conferences, court attendances, incidental personality transfer and reporting to you.
Our Fee Herein:	\$11,500.00
(E. & O.E.)	

Santa Claus sighed and pulled out his chequebook. "Death, taxes and lawyers," he muttered. "There is no getting away from any of them."