

BOYS WILL BE BOYS

A Coming of Age Story for the Ages



HERE IS NO DARKER PLACE IN THE WORLD than the North Pole a few days before Christmas. After the sun sets at Halloween, the Arctic lies blackened in shadow until spring. The clouds that gather each afternoon are invisible and the snow far below lies unseen on the ground. Nothing moves, or breathes or lives there. The darkness is utter and absolute.

Yet despite the forbidding blackness all around, there is one part of the North Pole where lights twinkle and laughter can be heard. There are workshops and factories there, surrounded by little cottages and brick houses. At the center of it all, rising twenty four stories in the midnight air stands a chrome and glass skyscraper.

On the top floor of that building there is a hall. At the end of the hall there are a pair of ornate carved walnut doors. A golden plaque mounted one of the doors says:

Santa Claus
Chief Executive Officer

Beside those impressive doors, three chairs are placed in a row against the wall. On this dark morning a few days before Christmas, three boys sat in those chairs and waited for the big doors at the end of the hall to open. While they waited, the skinny boy in the last chair stuck his finger in his mouth, then poked it into the ear of the chubby boy seated beside him.

“Cut it out, Iggy,” the chubby boy shouted as he twisted his head away from the drool soaked finger in his ear. The skinny boy just giggled.

The chubby boy turned to the third boy who was seated at the end of the row. "What are you looking at?" he asked.

The third boy struggled to hold back his laughter. He pointed to the chubby one. "You have spit in your ear," he said. Then he burst out laughing.

The chubby one shoved him in the ribs with his elbow. His chair tipped over and toppled to the floor. Then the chubby boy jumped on him and they wrestled their way in front of the big walnut doors. The skinny boy leapt onto the top of the pile and tried to pull the other two apart.

And that was what the rotund bearded man saw when he opened the big walnut door. Three boys dressed in red and green velvet rolling on the floor, grappling and poking each other. The bearded man winced when the skinny one took a knee in the eye and decided he had better break it up.

"Sneezes, Merry and Christmas!" he bellowed. "What's all this about?"

The three boys rolled off each other and shuffled to their feet. "He started it," said the chubby one and pointed in the general direction of the other two.

"I don't care who started it!" the old man shouted. "Look at you. Wet willies. Purple nurples. Hertz doughnuts. Circle games. It's always something. The three of you are a disgrace to the North Pole!"

"Sorry, Santa," the third boy mumbled. He looked down and traced a circle in the thick red carpet with the toe of his pointed green boot.

"We just can't help ourselves," pleaded the skinny boy.

Santa Claus snorted. "You're Christmas elves, not children. It's time you start acting your age!"

The three boys looked at each other. They were each over 400 years old, but they were not Christmas elves, anymore. They were just little boys.

They had been elves once, among the best at the North Pole. The skinny one was Iggy. He had been tall, for an elf, with pointed ears, a pointed nose and chin and long pointy fingers. He still had a mess of tangled black hair that pointed in all directions, but his pointed ears were gone. His nose and chin were soft and round and his fingers were short and stubby, with an arc of dirt under each nail.

The chubby one, Sam, had been the heaviest elf at the North Pole. He weighed nearly 300 pounds¹. His curly red hair topped a large round face that led to chins too numerous to count. He was lumpy and dimpled all over, with smaller lumps atop the bigger ones and even more dimples inside his dimples.

¹ For those unfamiliar with Imperial measurements of mass, 300 pounds is approximately 136 kilograms. It is also about 22 stone, 1334 newtons or 663,400 carats. By any measure, that is a lot of elf.

He was usually in a bad mood. Now, he barely weighed 120 pounds² and was down to only two chins. His lumps and dimples had all softened out. He was still a chubby fellow and his disposition had not improved, but he was not the elf he once was.

Yugo, the third boy, had once been the craftiest elf at the North Pole. He had thick dark hair and sported an enormous moustache. His quick and nimble fingers could design and build anything. Gizmos, widgets and whatchamacallits; there was nothing he could not make. He once built a snowmobile that could fly. Now he was a towheaded lad, his moustache gone and his fingers were clumsy and useless. His snowmobile was grounded.

Once they were elves. They did the sort of things elves do: building toys, singing songs and saving Christmas most every year. But the accidental detonation of an antimagicon bomb had knocked the Christmas magic right out of them. Once they were elves, now they were just little boys in torn and dirty velvet jackets.

Santa Claus had thundered on throughout all of that exposition and was still hollering. His eyes twinkled angrily. "There's no room for boys in this business. I need elves. This is the biggest toy making operation in the world! We have toys to build and deadlines to meet! I've got no time for noogies and wedgies!"

Iggy, Yugo and Sam shuffled in their dishevelled row, their heads bowed. Iggy raised a stubby finger.

"Yes, what is it?" barked Santa Claus.

"We were hoping you could help us," said Iggy.

"Turn us back into elves, he means," added Yugo.

"With your Christmas magic," finished Sam.

Santa Claus glared at the three boys before him. "Ho ho ho," he snorted. "Do you think Christmas magic grows on trees?" he yelled, then quickly built back up to full thunder. "Let me tell you something. There are no trees at the North pole. Not a one. It's only three days until Christmas and we need all the Christmas magic we've got to run the workshops and factories and power up the sled. I'm sorry boys, but we don't have any Christmas magic to spare, not a single cadabra."³

"But we need some Christmas magic," pleaded Iggy.

² 55 kilograms, 9 stone, 539 newtons or 265,500 carats.

³ A cadabra is the standard unit for measuring magic. One cadabra is the amount of mystical energy required to pull one medium sized white rabbit from a felt hat or to conjure a quarter from behind a child's ear. A pocus is equal to 12 cadabras. Twelve pocuses equate to one presto.

“Or we are going to be like this,” added Yugo.

“Forever,” finished Sam.

“Bah,” shouted Santa. “Kids these days can’t do anything for themselves. When we were your age we didn’t go around begging for Christmas magic. We made it ourselves.”

“How do we do that?” asked Iggy.

Santa Claus’ face turned red, and not in a merry way. “The old fashioned way,” he yelled. “You know how the stories go. Go find yourself a bitter old miser who’s forgotten his past. Or a little match girl who needs to be shown the way. That’s how you make up some Christmas magic. Now get out of here, I have work to do!”

With that, Santa Claus strode around his gigantic desk and slumped into his red leather chair. He looked up and saw that Iggy, Yugo and Sam were still standing in the doorway.

“Go on,” he waved them away, “go make yourself some magic. Then hurry back here, there’s a lot of work to be done!”



THAT WAS HOW IGGY, YUGO AND SAM found themselves scanning through a stack of maps, searching for someplace where they might be able to make some Christmas magic. They studied Norway and Kenya, but neither seemed the sort of places where a cantankerous miser or hypothermic match girl might be found. It was Yugo, who was paging through a California road atlas who finally found something promising.

“This looks promising,” he said, pointing his finger onto a stretch of highway along the Pacific coast.

Iggy and Sam looked over his shoulder. “Santa Claus Lane?” asked Iggy.

“Is that a real place?” asked Sam.

“It’s right here on the map,” said Yugo.

“Do you suppose they have misers and match girls there?” asked Iggy.

“It has to be full of Christmas magic, that’s for sure,” said Yugo.

“They wouldn’t call it Santa Claus Lane unless it was brimming with magic,” added Sam.

Yugo slammed the atlas shut. “That’s it then, let’s go.”

“But how are we going to get there?” asked Iggy.

“We don’t have the snowmobile, anymore,” said Sam. He sounded a bit too grateful when he said it. Yugo glared at him.

It was true though. Yugo had once had a remarkable snowmobile. It scooted through the deepest snow with ease, but it could also fly through the air, glide through the oceans and even occasionally travel through time. However, like the elves, it had been changed in the antimagicon accident. The lithium fusion reactor, the satellite guidance system and the onboard waffle maker were all gone. It was just an ordinary snowmobile, now. It was handy for getting around the North Pole, but would not be of any use in getting the boys to California.

“There won’t be a bus coming this way for months,” said Iggy.

“And the Polar Express only runs one way to the North Pole,” said Sam.

Yugo’s eyes sparkled mischievously. “I think I know a way,” he smiled. He punched Sam hard in the shoulder and leapt to his feet. Iggy and Sam followed him out of their tiny room in Elves Barracks B, down the hall and out the main doors. They dashed across the brick courtyard between Elves Barracks B and C and then down the peppermint lane that led past the Hot Chocolate Tavern and the Gumdrop Factory. They turned at the Toy Truck Garage and ran by the Tinsel Mill before they stopped at the hangar with the sloped roof at the end of the road.

“Here we are, boys,” said Yugo proudly.

“The reindeer stables?” said Iggy.

“I don’t think that this is a good idea,” said Sam.

Iggy grinned, “I think it’s a great idea,” he said. Even though his elfiness was gone, Iggy still retained his unbounded optimism. Iggy had never heard of a bad idea. In his mind, all ideas ranged from ‘good’ to ‘fan-fruitcake-tastic’.

Sam was of a contrary mind. This was to be expected. In almost all cases, Sam was of a contrary mind. “We can’t take the sled,” he said.

“We have to, Sam,” said Iggy. “It’s not about saving Christmas this time. It’s about saving ourselves.”

“Besides, Santa told us that we had to take care of this. He probably meant for us to borrow the sled for a while,” added Yugo.

Yugo walked over to a keypad beside the main door. He might be a towheaded boy and not an elf, but Yugo was still a brilliant towheaded boy. He had so many IQ points, he used a slide ruler to count them all.

He scratched his chin and then tapped in 0-4-0-4-0-4 onto the keypad. There was a friendly sounding ‘ping’ and the door slowly swung open.

“How did you figure that out?” asked Iggy.

“It was elementary,” explained Yugo. “If you read 040404 upside down, it spells out ‘ho ho ho.’ What other combination would Santa Claus use?”

The three boys strode into the hangar and stood before the great red sleigh that Santa Claus used to deliver presents each Christmas Eve. Along the south wall⁴ of the hangar was a row of pens, each with a reindeer inside. They were big, among the finest of their breed, with wide racks of antlers and mist rising from their great black noses. Yugo walked over to the nearest pen and opened it. “We’ll just borrow it for a little while. We’ll be back before Santa even notices that it is gone.”

Iggy led another reindeer out of its pen and harnessed it to the sled.

Sam stood by the door of one of the reindeer pens. He rested his hand on the latch, then turned to the others. “What about the alarm?” he asked. “There must be an alarm?”

“Why would there be an alarm?” asked Yugo. “We used the right security code to open the door, didn’t we?” I don’t think that we have to worry about an alarm.”

At that moment, the alarm went off. The three boys spun and looked back at the door. On the top of the frame a golden horn blew a long shrill tone.

“Come on, Sam,” shouted Iggy as he ran towards the door. Sam covered his rounded ears and shuffled along behind. Iggy reached the door and began digging into his pockets. Like all boys, his pockets were stuffed full of all manner of things. He dug out a broken pencil, three elastic bands, some paper clips and a live frog. His other pocket yielded a sock with a hole in the toe, a few checkers and the corner of a peanut butter and jam sandwich. Iggy stuffed everything into the sock.

When they reached the door, Yugo helped Iggy climb up onto Sam’s shoulders and Iggy jammed the sock, frog and all, into the mouth of the horn. The howling stopped at once, replaced by a mournful and muffled ‘ribbit’.

Iggy climbed down from Sam’s back and wiped his brow. “That was a close one,” he said.

“It’s not over yet,” said Yugo, looking up. He pointed to the top of the hanger. A security camera hung down from the ceiling. It slowly rotated, panning the entire room.

“We have to cover up that camera,” said Iggy.

“But how?” asked Yugo.

“This should do it,” said Sam, pulling the pointed velvet cap with the jingle bell from his head.

⁴ At the North Pole, every direction is south. Because of this, all of the walls in the hangar were the south wall. The reindeer pens therefore lined along each of them.

“That would work, but how are you going to put it over the camera?” said Iggy. “It’s over fifty feet⁵ high. We can’t get up there.

“Sure we can,” said Yugo. He had returned to the pens that lined the south wall and led one of the reindeer out onto the floor.

Sam reached into his pocket and pulled out a carrot and some thumbtacks. He brushed off the thumbtacks and raised the carrot to the reindeer’s mouth. “Come on, Comet,” he said. “Let’s get up there.” He climbed up onto the big reindeer’s back and wrapped his beefy arms around its neck.

The reindeer snorted then leapt up into the air. Sam closed his eyes tightly as they rose up to the ceiling.

“Go on, Sam, cover up the camera!” shouted Iggy from far below. Sam closed his eyes tighter. He gripped his cap in his right hand and slowly reached it out in the direction of the camera.

“Higher!” shouted Yugo.

“Lower!” hollered Iggy.

“A little to the left!” called Yugo.

“More right!” yelled Iggy.

Sam blindly waved the cap around in response to the shouted directions of his friends. Finally, the brim hooked on to the camera lens and he was able to drape the cap over it. The reindeer snorted and then swooped back down to the ground. Sam slipped off and sat, shaking, while Iggy and Yugo quickly harnessed the team to the sled. They climbed up into it and Yugo took the reins in his hand.

“Come along, Sam,” said Iggy. “We have to go.”

Sam just sat on the floor shaking his head. “You guys go without me,” he said. “I’ve had enough flying for one day.”

Just then, a pair of burly elves burst into the hangar. “Elf police!” barked the first elf.

“Everybody freeze!” bellowed the second.

“I’m already freezing,” whimpered Sam. “It’s 40 below⁶ out there.”

⁵ Fifty feet is about 12 meters. It is also about 8 fathoms, 3 rods or 33 cubits, in case you were wondering.

⁶ Forty degrees below zero on the Celsius scale is the same as 40 degrees below zero on the Fahrenheit scale. It is also the same temperature as 233 degrees Kelvin, which is not nearly as warm as it sounds.

“Giddy up,” hollered Yugo. The reindeer team took to the air, dragging the great red sled behind them. Iggy reached out and pulled Sam into the sled as they passed him. They glided up into the air and flew over the heads of the elf police, through the door and out into the dark Arctic night.

“Next stop, Santa Claus Lane!” shouted Iggy.

“We’re going to be in so much trouble when we get back,” said Sam.

Yugo nodded thoughtfully as he turned the reindeer team south. But then, he thought, they were already in a lot of trouble. There was no place at the North Pole for little boys. Unless they found some way to make Christmas magic, they were going to stay little boys forever and they would never be coming home.



SANTA CLAUS LANE IS A ONE KILOMETRE⁷ strip of freeway that runs parallel to the Pacific Coast Highway a short drive south from Santa Barbara. It is a dusty stretch of road along the beach. There are a few shops near the junction where it rejoins the main highway. In the 1940s, it was a bustling road side tourist attraction, with a toy store, candy shop with a giant statue of Santa Claus on the roof. A toy train circled the area and people came from miles around to post their Christmas cards from the post office at Santa Claus Lane.

All of that is gone now. The candy shop is now a dollar store, the toy store is empty and the post office is closed. The big statue of Santa Claus was taken down, restored and moved to a park in Oxnard.⁸ All that is left of the Christmas themed destination of 60 years ago is the name on the road sign.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam arrived at Santa Claus Lane a little after 2 o’clock in the afternoon. The runners of the sled scraped along the quiet street as they skidded to a stop in front of the Beach Tavern. Even though it was December, the mid afternoon sun shone brightly. There were a few cars and trucks

⁷ One kilometre is 0.62 miles, 1100 yards and nearly 5 furlongs.

⁸ Oxnard is the largest city in Ventura County, California and is located about 24 miles (39 kilometres or 192 furlongs) from Santa Claus Lane. It is best known for being the strawberry and lima bean capital of California and for having a funny sounding name. The old statue is located on Highway 101, which runs right through downtown Oxnard.



parked along the side of the road. It was a bit tricky, but Yugo was eventually able to parallel park the sled between a panel van and an old Plymouth Fury. The three boys climbed down from the sled and took a look at their surroundings.

“What a dump,” said Sam.

Iggy nodded in agreement. “It certainly doesn’t look like the sort of place that is filled with Christmas magic.”

“Santa Claus said we had to make it for ourselves,” said Yugo.

“We are going to have to make it, because that’s the only way we are going to find any here,” said Sam. He kicked an empty can that was lying on the street and it skipped towards a squirrel hunched over a berry by the side of the road. The squirrel darted into the tall brown grass behind it and disappeared.

“There must be a crusty old miser or a desperate little match girl around here somewhere,” said Iggy.

They looked up and down the street, but since little match girls were scarce there were none to be found. None of the halls were decked and there were no holly bushes in sight. There were no silver bells or candy canes or snow glistening in the lane. In fact, there was no snow anywhere. Even in December, it never snows on Santa Claus Lane.

A fierce growl sounded at the side of the road. Iggy and Yugo spun around and looked to the spot where the squirrel had dashed away. Sam just raised his hand and pointed his stomach. “Sorry, that was me. I’m starving after all of that sleigh stealing and flying around.”

“Maybe we should stop for lunch,” said Iggy.

Yugo gestured at the Beach Tavern across the street. “That place doesn’t look too bad,” he said.

They walked up the sagging wooden steps and pulled on a door handle in the shape of a ship’s wheel. They stepped into a dark, wood paneled passage that led to a dark, wood paneled room. There were a few tables visible in the gloom, where gloomy people sat bent over their glasses.

A silver haired woman walked over to the boys. She hobbled a little as she walked, and her leathery skin creaked a little with each step. Her wrinkled face was covered in heavy makeup that might have been applied with a drywaller’s knife. Despite her obviously advanced years, she wore a tight red sweater with a plunging neckline exposing cleavage that hung nearly to her navel. Her disturbingly short leather skirt had a slit on one side that revealed her thin, veined legs and the scar from a recent hip replacement. “Sorry fellas, no minors allowed,” she said.

Iggy chuckled, “that’s no problem.” He pulled a hand tooled leather wallet from the pocket of his red velvet pants and withdrew a card. He passed it to the silver haired woman.

She stared at it for a few moments. “And what is this supposed to be?” she asked scornfully.

“That’s my driving license,” he explained. “Issued by the NPDMV⁹ itself.”

“I see,” she said. “You really don’t look like you’re ... “ she looked down at the license again. “ ... 398 years old. And the gentleman in this picture doesn’t look very much like you. He has pointy ears and looks to be a right jolly old elf.”

She turned to Yugo and Sam. “What about you two?”

Yugo and Sam each reached into their pockets and passed up their driving licenses. The silver haired woman stared at them carefully.

“Are you sure this is you?” she asked Yugo. “The man on this card has an enormous moustache. Good looking, too. I think this might belong to your Dad.” She winked and added, “maybe you should ask your Dad to call me.”

She looked at Sam. “And I suppose that you are supposed to be Samwidge Quincival Butterberry of No. 16 Candy Cane Road, North Pole?”

Sam nodded politely.

“Says here that you’re 412 years old and weigh 288 pounds.” She looked him up and down. “You don’t look a day over 12, or an ounce over 120.” She looked dubiously at the three boys. “You fellows wouldn’t be trying to fool old Eunice with a bunch of phony IDs, would you?”

Iggy pulled off his pointed green cap, looked up and said, “Please ma’am. We were just looking for something to eat. We’ve come a long way and we’re awfully hungry.”

Eunice looked down at the three and back at their drivers’ licenses. She chuckled and said, “All right, Ignatio Jellybeagle, Yugorman Nimblehandle and Samwidge Butterberry of the North Pole, since you all have your ID I guess you can come on inside.” She waved her skinny blue arm at the gloomy room behind her. “Sit down anywhere.” She tottered back behind the bar on her 6 inch stiletto heels.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam worked their way through the dim room and sat at a round table in the corner. “She seems nice,” said Iggy. He thought everyone seemed nice. If he was ever put in charge of the ‘Naughty and Nice List’, Santa Claus would have to shorten the name to the ‘Nice List’.

“Her skirt is disturbingly short,” said Yugo.

⁹ North Pole Department of Motor Vehicles.

“I didn’t mind so much,” said Sam. “But then, I go for younger women.”

Eunice returned a few moments later with a tray of murky looking water glasses. She passed them each a menu printed on wrinkled yellow paper and set their glasses in front of them. “Special today is an underdone steak with overdone fries on the side. Now can I offer you, er, older gentlemen something from the drinks menu?”

Iggy ordered chocolate milk, Yugo had a soda water and Sam asked for a double vodka cranberry paralysed with a slice of lime. Eunice smiled and winked at him. Her big fake eyelash slipped and swung limply from her eyelid. She blinked quickly a few times and it flipped back into place.

Their drinks arrived and they each picked something from the menu for lunch. Sam picked two somethings. A few gloomy looking men shuffled out of the room, but then a few more even gloomier looking men shuffled in and took their place. Eunice came back and asked the boys if they wanted desert. Iggy and Yugo politely declined, though Sam ordered three fudge sundaes.

He was polishing off his last sundae when Eunice returned with the bill. She turned one of the chairs around and sat down with her bony legs spread around the back of it. Iggy blushed and turned away. Sam looked anywhere but where the unpaid bill was resting on the table. Yugo sighed and reached for his wallet.

“So what brings you fellers to Santa Claus Lane?” asked Eunice.

Iggy replied, “We’re looking for some Christmas magic. We figured this was as good a place to start as it gets.”

Eunice shook her head. “There isn’t any Christmas magic here. Hasn’t been since I was a little girl.”

One look at Eunice’s withered visage suggested that was a very long time ago indeed. “I guess we do have to make it ourselves, after all,” said Yugo.

“We need to find a crusty old miser,” said Sam. “Or a little match girl. Have you got any of those around?”

Eunice shook her head. “Never seen any match girls around here. We’ve got plenty of crusty folks, though. There’s Fat Reggie Wiggins. He’s crusty and old. Not much of a tipper, either.”

“That sounds promising,” said Iggy.

“And Big Jimmy Carbuncle. He’s sure crusty. Not as old as Fat Reggie Wiggins, mind you, but he’s plenty crusty. Another terrible tipper, too.”

Yugo started writing names down on the back of the check. “Anyone else?” he asked.

“Oh goodness, yes,” said Eunice. “There’s Abel Wiseman. He owns the Bait ‘n Surf. Been crusty as yesterday’s toast ever since his wife and daughter died. Terrible tragedy that was.”

“Oh dear,” said Iggy. “What happened?”

“They were out fishing on Abel’s boat out near Sandy Point one Christmas Eve. I remember it like it was yesterday, but it must have been seven years ago or more. Their boat was attacked by group of sharks.”

“A shiver, you mean,” said Yugo. “A group of sharks is called a shiver.”

Eunice gave Yugo a prickly look and continued. “As I was saying, their boat was attacked by a ... shiver ... of sharks. The boat went down and Abel was lucky to make it to shore in one piece. Nobody never saw his wife or daughter again. Good luck getting any Christmas magic out of him. Or anyone else around here, for that matter.”

Eunice looked off into the distance. “There used to be lots of Christmas magic here,” she said softly. “There were toy shops and candy stores and peppermint fences all along the road. It was Christmas most every day. People used to come from all over to see it. Now the only people you see are the old timers who never left and folks looking for directions to someplace else.”

Yugo looked at the list of names. “This looks to be a pretty good start. Where can we find these gentlemen?” he asked.

“Gentlemen?” Eunice snorted. “They’re men all right, but there isn’t one of them that you’d call gentle. They’ll probably all wind up here around happy hour. But they usually hang out down near Abel’s place.”

Iggy rose from his chair. “Time we got started, I guess.”

Yugo stood up beside him and slipped the list of names into his pocket. “Thanks for all of your help, Eunice,” he said.

“Anytime, boys. Maybe next time you can bring some of your older brothers down with you.” She gave another shaky wink and cackled loudly.

Sam slowly got to his feet and followed the others out of the gloom of Beach Tavern and into the brilliant sunshine of a southern California afternoon. They walked south along the dusty road. They reached the next building, where the words **TOY CASTLE** were painted above the door in festive, yet faded, red and green paint. A ‘For Lease’ sign, written in faded felt marker, was taped to the door. They walked up to the windows and looked inside. The shelves inside were bare and dusty. A lone hobby horse was tipped over in one corner.

Iggy turned away from the window. “No toys,” he said.

“This place really needs some elves,” said Yugo.

They turned and walked further down the street. The sign on the next building once read **The Candy Cave** in whimsical type, but the old sign was covered by a weathered poster that said “Thrift \$hop” instead. It was the same next door, where the **HAPPY CAKE CO.** (The Happiest Cakes on Earth!) had long since been replaced by **Dewey’s Pawn Shop** (We’ll Take That TV!). It was the same on the next block, where they found a dilapidated strip mall, stripped of all joy. There were

no teddy bears or candy whistles for sale; just dingy storefronts offering cheap sunglasses and T-shirts with crude slogans. Sam stopped for a moment to look at one that read "My Other Shirt is at Your Mom's House." He did not really understand the joke, so he moved on. They passed a liquor store and a pawn shop and then another liquor store.

They crossed a street and walked through a paved lot, with rusted cars parked unevenly in front of a clapboard building with a wooden sign on the roof that said "Abel's Bait 'n Surf". Next to the door, two grizzled old men sat hunched over a card table playing chess.

"Checkmate," said the first man. He was a small man, scarcely bigger than an elf himself, with thinning gray hair, a round red nose between two red cheeks and white hair bristling from his chin and ears. He wore a stained white sleeveless T-shirt and torn blue jeans. When he smiled, a gap appeared in the top row of his yellow teeth.

"Well, I'll be badgered, you old buzzard," said the second old man. He was taller, skinnier and even more grizzled than the first. Tufts of gray hair poked out from under his grease stained baseball cap and from the end of his long hooked nose. He looked at the chessboard over a pair of lopsided wire spectacles. His bony elbows poked through tattered holes in the sleeves of his blue plaid shirt. He tipped over his king, then started setting up the pieces for another game.

"Those two certainly look crusty enough," said Iggy. Yugo and Sam nodded. They walked up to the edge of the table and Iggy cleared his throat. The two men ignored him and began playing their game. The pieces moved quickly up and down the chessboard and a heap of pawns and bishops soon accumulated at the edge of the table.

Iggy cleared his throat again. The smaller of the two grizzled men looked up from the chessboard, and glared at him. "What is it, kid?" he growled.

Iggy gulped. The tall grizzled man licked his lips with his thick pink tongue and snarled, "quit yer gawping and speak up."

Yugo looked down at his list. "Do either of you know Big Jim Carbuncle or Reggie Wiggins? We were told we might find them here and that they could help us make some Christmas magic."

The two grizzled men blinked and then the smaller one burst out in raspy laughter that soon developed into a fit of coughing. He was joined by the taller one, who started choking on his own reedy chuckles. They both leaned over in their chairs, hacking and wheezing as their faces turned even redder.

Iggy and Yugo looked at each other. Finally, Sam reached over and clapped the smaller man on the back. He spat out a great glob of green and yellow phlegm and then slowly regained his breath. The tall fellow hacked out his own buttery blob and then shook his head slowly.

“Oh my boys, that was a good one,” he wheezed. “Can you imagine either one of us making any Christmas magic, Big Jimmy?”

“Not in a hundred years, Fat Reg,” said Big Jimmy.

Yugo looked at the little grizzled old man, who was still trying to catch his breath. “You’re Big Jimmy Carbuncle?” he asked.

“In the flesh,” wheezed Big Jimmy.

“But you’re no bigger than I am!” squealed Sam.

Big Jimmy rose slowly to his feet, looked Sam in the eye and poked a sturdy grizzled finger into his chest. “Listen up, punk,” he sneered, “I was Big Jimmy long afore you was born and I’ll still be Big Jimmy long after I finish kickin’ the punk outta you.”

“Hey there, Big Jimmy,” coughed Fat Reg, “you can’t be kickin’ the punk outta him. He’s just a little kid.”

“Hmph,” snorted Big Jimmy.

“And why do they call you Fat Reg?” asked Sam. “You’re as thin as a reed. I’m way fatter than you are.”

Fat Reg leapt to his feet and grabbed Sam by the collar. “Now you listen to me you little turnip. I’m just as fat as I wanna be and make no mistake about that.” He gave Sam a vigorous shake and then threw him to the ground.

Sam bounced off of the sidewalk and whimpered, “I think I’ll stop talking now.”

Iggy held out his hand. “We’re thrilled to meet you fellows,” he said. Big Jimmy and Fat Reg both ignored Iggy’s outstretched hand. He slipped it into his pocket and continued. “Like we said, we need the help of a couple of crusty old timers like yourselves so that we can make some Christmas magic.”

Big Jimmy and Fat Reg exchanged a look and then Big Jimmy growled. “You seem like nice kids, even if junior here is a bit uppity,” he gave the prostate Sam a quick kick with his steel toed hiking boot. “But there ain’t no Christmas magic on Santa Claus Lane no more.”

Yugo shook his head. “You mean there is Christmas magic here?”

Big Jimmy spat on the sidewalk and barked, “what did I just say?”

“I don’t really know,” Yugo stammered. “You used a triple negative there.”

“Don’t you be sassin’ me sonny or I’ll give you a thumpin’ you won’t never forget.” Big Jimmy gave Sam another kick.

Iggy interjected, “we were told that we could make some Christmas magic if we found someone old and crusty.”

“And you two certainly are crusty,” said Yugo.

“And old,” added Sam. Big Jimmy gave him another kick.

“Sure enough,” nodded Fat Reg. “Big Jimmy here is as crusty as Aunt Mildred’s Christmas turkey.”

Big Jimmy smiled and grinned a gap toothed yellow smile. “And Fat Reg is as crusty as an eye infection.” Fat Reg nodded proudly. “But it ain’t enough to be crusty to make yer Christmas magic. As crusty as we might be, and we’re plenty crusty, yer ain’t gonna make no Christmas magic outta neither one of us.”

“Why not?” asked Iggy.

“I’ll tell yer why not,” said Big Jimmy. “Yer don’t live on Santa Claus Lane fer just about ferever without learnin’ a thing or three about yer Christmas magic. It ain’t enough to be crusty, you gotta hate yer Christmas. And ain’t neither one of us hates Christmas.”

“Nossir,” said Fat Reg. “I remember when this old street was just about the merriest little road this side of the North Pole. You could git peppermint candy floss and reindeer rides and folks sung them Christmas songs all the year long. It ain’t like that no more, but that don’t mean we don’t like Christmas just fine.”

“That’s right,” said Big Jimmy. “Why, every year Fat Reg and Mrs. Fat Reg cook up a Christmas feast and it’s just swell. There’s fresh caught turkeyfish¹⁰ and holly salad¹¹ and all the fixin’s.”

“Now, to make yer Christmas magic, yer gotta find someone who’s really crusty and what hates him some Christmas,” said Fat Reg.

“And then yer make him like it,” said Big Jimmy. “And poof, you git yer some Christmas magic.”

“Just like them olden days,” said Fat Reg wistfully.

Iggy shook his head. “This is hopeless. We’ve already traveled 4000 miles.¹² Where are we going to find someone as crusty as you two who hates Christmas?”

¹⁰ The zebra turkeyfish, or lionfish, is ridiculously poisonous and is not a suitable entree at any Christmas dinner. The venom from the turkeyfish causes extreme pain, rapid swelling and paralysis. While ingestion of the turkeyfish can be fatal, most people who have sampled it survive, despite the unrelenting agony they endure for several weeks afterwards.

¹¹ Like the turkeyfish, holly is extremely toxic. The berries of a holly shrub cause nausea, vomiting and explosive diarrhea. Deck your halls with all the boughs of holly you please, but by no means should you serve it to your Christmas company.

“Oh, you don’t have to look so far,” said Big Jimmy. “That there’s the door to Abel Wiseman’s baitin’ and surfin’ emporium. And there ain’t nobody nowhere what is as crusty and what hates Christmas as much as Abel Wiseman.”

“That’s right,” said Fat Reg. “Abel’s as crusty as week old puddin’. Every year me and Mrs. Fat Reg invite him over fer Christmas supper and every year he says ‘no thank yer, anyways.’”

“Old Abel ain’t never been the same since all that bad business with them sharks,” said Big Jimmy.

“That’s it then,” said Iggy. “We’ll just go into the bait shop and get Abel to like Christmas.”

“And then we’ll have all the Christmas magic we need to put ourselves right again,” said Yugo.

Sam, who had only now pulled himself to his feet, just grunted. Big Jimmy gave him another kick in the ribs, just to show that he really was as crusty as everyone said he was.



IGGY, YUGO AND SAM STEPPED CAUTIOUSLY through the door of Abel’s Bait ‘n Surf.

It was a ramshackle place, with old wooden shelves lining the wall. Surfboards hung from hooks on the ceiling and metal buckets lined the floor, each filled to the top with tangled knots of wriggling worms. Iggy looked in one, made a face and then carried on to the back of the shop.

A tall, lean man in a bright blue tropical shirt covered with orange and yellow flowers stood behind the counter. His long red hair was tied in a ponytail at the back. His red beard was flecked with gray. His face was tanned and leathery. His eyes were dark and his mouth was drawn into a frown.

Iggy strode up to the counter and introduced himself. “Hello, my name is Iggy, these are my friends Yugo and Sam. We’re looking for Mr. Wiseman.”

The tall man scowled at them. “Yer looking at him,” he said. “This is my place.”

“And a fine place it is, too,” said Yugo.

“You certainly have a lot of bait,” added Sam, helpfully.

Abel Wiseman just glared at him. “What do you want?”

¹² Santa Claus Lane is almost exactly 4000 miles from the North Pole (I looked it up). That is 6437 kilometres, 32,000 furlongs or 253,400,000 inches.

“We were hoping that you could help us find some Christmas magic,” said Iggy, smiling.

Abel’s eyes grew even darker. “There ain’t no Christmas nevermind in this shop. I sell surfboards and I sell bait. You want some bait?”

“But it’s almost Christmas,” said Yugo. “Don’t you have anything a little more seasonal for sale?”

“There ain’t no Christmas in this shop and there never will be,” barked Abel. He looked off into the distance. “Not anymore,” he added.

“Surely you don’t mean that,” said Sam.

“I surely do,” snapped Abel. “Ain’t no profit in no Christmas. ”

“There might not be any profit in Christmas,” replied Iggy, “But it has always been good to us.”

“And it could be good to you, too,” said Yugo.

“Meh. Gobstoppers,” sneered Abel. “You can have yer Christmas and leave me to have mine.”

“But you don’t have it at all,” said Sam. “And we want to help.”

Abel leaned over the table, his tanned face turning purple. “I don’t want none of yer help. You can buy some bait or you can git out.” He came around the counter and Iggy, Yugo and Sam retreated towards the front door.

“Merry Christmas,” Iggy called back over his shoulder.

“That’s right yer little twerps, git on out of here,” thundered Abel. “And take all yer ideas of a merry Christmas with you.” He picked up a bucket of nightcrawlers and drew it back.

Big Jimmy and Fat Reg looked up from their chess game and guffawed as the three boys stumbled through the door of the bait shop, followed by a stream of glistening pink worms.

“Seems you met our Abel,” giggled Big Jimmy. “Crusty enough fer you?”

Iggy picked a worm from his shoulder and set it on the grass. It disappeared underground. “He’s pretty crusty all right.”

“Crusty as the Mohorovičić Discontinuity,”¹³ added Yugo.

“Ain’t so easy to make no Christmas magic, after all, ain’t it?” said Fat Reg.

“It’s never easy for us,” said Sam as a fat pink worm crawled down the collar of his tunic. He reached around his back to try and retrieve it, but it nestled into

¹³ The Mohorovičić Discontinuity is a geologic formation that lies directly beneath the Earth's crust. It is made of much harder stuff than the layers of dirt and rock above it. It is, if you will, even crustier than the crust of the Earth.

to a warm spot between his shoulder blades and Sam strained helplessly to get it. He finally pulled his tunic off and shook the worm loose from its resting place. It slid silently under the ground while Sam stared at it and panted. "It's never easy," he repeated.

Iggy put his arm over Sam's shoulder. "Looks like we're going to have to come up with a better plan if we're going to make any Christmas magic here," he said. Sam pulled his shirt back on and the three boys headed out of the parking lot and down the street.



WILIGHT PASSES IN MOMENTS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA. By the time Iggy, Yugo

and Sam had climbed over the stone barrier at the end of the block and onto the beach beyond it, the sun had set and all was dark. The only light was the moon and stars in the sky and a small bonfire flickered and glowed some ways down the beach. With nowhere else to go, they worked their way through the sand towards the fire.

"It sure gets dark quickly here," said Iggy.

"Not as dark as the North Pole, though," said Yugo. "It's the darkest place in the world, or so I've heard."

"I don't like sand," Sam grumbled as he shuffled down the beach. "It's coarse and rough and irritating and it gets everywhere."

Iggy and Yugo both thought that was an odd thing to say in any circumstance, but they kept walking. Soon they reached the little fire. A dirty little boy who looked to be about ten years old, but who might have been a dirty little girl who looked to be about ten years old sat beside it on a log and poked at the glowing embers with a stick. He, or maybe it was she, had rusty hair that was matted with sand and twigs and wore a dirty white shirt and cut-off jeans. He (perhaps she) smiled as the three boys approached.

"Welcome to my beach, boys," he, or maybe she, said. "Pull up a stretch of log and make yourself at home."

Iggy stepped over the log and sat down. "You're the first friendly person we've met on Santa Claus Lane," he said.

"Oh, I don't live over there," replied the boy, who Iggy thought might be a girl after all. "Everyone over there is so crusty."

"Tell us about it," sighed Yugo.

"Crustier than my socks on laundry day," said Sam.

"I'm Iggy," said Iggy. "And you are?"

“My name’s Jamie,” came the reply. Iggy found this to be of no help at all in sorting out his current gender confusion.

“Where are your parents?” asked Yugo. He looked around. There was nobody else in sight.

“Don’t got none of those,” said Jamie. “I’ve been living here on the beach by myself for as long as I can remember.”

“You can’t live on the beach,” snorted Sam. “It’s covered in ... sand.” He said the last word with a certain disgusted whine.

“Don’t be silly,” said Jamie. “I don’t sleep down here.”

“That’s a relief,” said Iggy.

“I spend the nights in the caves up by the seawall. There’s plenty of room for more if you need a place to hang your caps.”

“You really live in a cave on the beach?” asked Yugo

Jamie nodded. Sam shook his head. “Why don’t you just head up to the highway? There must be someplace that you can stay there?”

“Why should I?” said Jamie. “I like it here. I get to play in the sea every day. The weather is always nice and there’s plenty to eat.” Sam cast his eyes over a heap of seaweed piled at the water’s edge and shuddered.

Jamie gave the fire another poke with the stick and asked, “I’ve never seen you around. What brings you fellows down to Santa Claus Lane?”

“Christmas magic,” said Iggy.

Jamie snorted. “Good luck finding any of that around here.”

“Oh, we’re on the right track,” said Yugo. “We needed to find a crusty old man who hates Christmas.”

“Maybe you have come to the right place, then” said Jamie. “There’s plenty of those about.”

“Or a little orphan match girl,” said Sam.

“Those are harder to find,” said Jamie. Sam looked at Jamie and at the little bonfire on the beach and he wondered.

“We might have found our man,” said Iggy. “He’s as crusty as overdone waffles and he really needs a little Christmas.”

“Right this very minute,” added Yugo. “And I have a plan.”

Three heads, six eyes and three noses turned and faced, looked and smelled in his direction. “I’m not sure I want to hear this,” said Sam.

“I do,” said Jamie, leaning forward on his, or possibly her, log.

“Don’t be so sure about that,” said Sam. “These plans are usually pretty scary.”

“I want to hear it, too,” said Iggy. Unlike Sam, Iggy had always enjoyed Yugo’s plans; even if they were often terrifying.

Yugo outlined his plan. “We do it just like in that old story. You know the one, where the crusty old miser gets haunted by a bunch of ghosts on Christmas Eve. They take turns showing him the folly of his ways. By the time the sun comes up on Christmas morning, he’s a changed man and every one lives happily ever after.”

“You see, that’s what I’m talking about,” said Sam. “Haunted by ghosts. I knew this plan would be frightening.”

“Here’s what we do,” continued Yugo. “There are four ghosts in the story and there are four of us. We each take the part of a ghost and take turns haunting Abel. We’ll show him what he’s missing this Christmas. By morning, he won’t be crusty anymore and we’ll have all the Christmas magic we need.”

“I think it’s a great plan,” smiled Iggy.

“Me too,” said Jamie.

Yugo leaned forward and explained the details of his plan. “We’ll need some glitter,” he said. “And a projector. We’ll have to find a dress in your size, Iggy. Of course we’ll need some old postcards and some lumber. And we’re going to need fruitcake. Lots and lots of fruitcake.” Yugo continued listing items while he drew some pictures in the sand with a stick.

“I think this is really going to work,” smiled Iggy.

“Sam just shook his head and muttered, “why does it always have to be so scary?”



IGGY AND YUGO WOKE UP EARLY THE NEXT MORNING. They had spent the night on the beach curled up near the dwindling embers of Jamie’s fire. Sam, who did not care much for sand, was snoring peacefully a little ways off on a pile of palm leaves.

Iggy walked over to him and gave him a gentle poke in the ribs with the toe of his green velvet boot. “Time to get up and at them, Sam,” he said.

“There’s only two days until Christmas,” said Yugo. “We have a lot of work to do.” Sam just gave out a snort and rolled over.

“Is he always like this in the morning?” asked Jamie.

“He’s usually like this until after lunchtime,” said Iggy. He gave Sam another kick.

“I think I know something that might wake him up.” Jamie made a loud barking noise.

“Oh, that will never wake him up,” said Iggy.

“Sam could sleep through an air raid,” said Yugo.

“I don’t think he can sleep through this.” Jamie barked again. Another bark rang out in the distance. Jamie gave three more quick barks and then stepped back.

A dark shape appeared at the water’s edge. As the waves pulled back, Iggy and Yugo saw the great black form of an elephant seal¹⁴ lurch out of the ocean. It shuffled through the sand to where Sam still lay sleeping and started nuzzling his neck with its fleshy snout. Sam draped his arm around the seal’s neck and drew it closer. “ooh, Eunice,” he cooed in his sleep.

Iggy and Yugo traded a glance. Then the seal gave out a great honking bark and Sam jumped to his feet. He looked down at the seal and it let out a long, loud bray. He ran behind Iggy and Yugo and then wiped the seal slobber from his collar with his cap.

“You could have just poked me,” he whimpered. He put his damp cap back on his head, and the four of them walked up the beach and back onto Santa Claus Lane. The Thrift \$hop had just opened and they filled a cart with supplies. At first, the sour faced storekeeper, who was as crusty as an old sponge, refused to accept Iggy’s North Pole Express™ card. But once Iggy offered to add in a tip, he rang the purchase through.

From there, the little band worked their way up the road to an old souvenir shop. There were old postcards for sale and Yugo picked up a few. The old woman at the cash register was not nearly as crusty as most of the other folks they had met. She had known Abel for years and they spoke with her for a little while. Iggy took careful notes while Sam tried on a pair of sunglasses. Then it was on to the electronics store where Yugo selected several boxes and some wire. Sam tried on some more sunglasses and Iggy took some more notes.

They wheeled their purchases in three shopping carts up Santa Claus Lane. They stopped in front of the Bait ‘n Surf, where Big Jimmy and Fat Reg were still playing chess. Yugo unpacked a camera from the boxes in his shopping cart and snapped a few photos. Big Jimmy got up, waved his walking stick at

¹⁴ The southern elephant seal, or *mirounga leonina*, is found all along the California coast. An adult elephant seal is up to 16 feet (4.8 meters or 2.6 fathoms) in length and weighs about 6000 pounds (2700 kilograms or 425 stone). They take their name from their large fleshy snouts, which resemble an elephant's trunk and are reported to be particularly slobbery.

him and shouted something about stupid kids and his lawn. Yugo packed up his camera and they ran around to the back of the building.

“That’s where Abel lives,” said Iggy, pointing to an apartment above the Bait ‘n Surf.

“If only we could get inside,” said Yugo. He looked at the boxes in his cart. “I just need a few minutes to get everything set up.”

“No problem,” said Jamie, and started to scale the brick wall.

“What are you doing?” grimaced Sam. He looked up at Jamie through his new sunglasses, which still had the tag on them. Jamie reached the apartment window. He (it could be she) fiddled with the latch for a minute, then tore open the shutters and threw up the sash. Sam lowered his face into his hands and muttered, “Oh man, we are going to be in so much trouble.”

“Don’t worry Sam,” Jamie called from the window ledge. “I do this all the time. You can’t just live on seaweed, you know.” With that, Jamie slipped into the open window. Yugo selected some boxes from the cart and followed Jamie inside. Iggy shrugged and climbed up through the window to help.

Sam shook his head. “I’ll just stay down here and keep a lookout,” he offered.

Sam was still keeping a lookout a few minutes later when he was hit in the head with a heavy pillow case full of items. He looked up at Iggy and Yugo who were climbing back down the wall.

“Oops,” said Iggy.

“Sorry about that,” said Yugo.

Sam picked up the pillow case and looked inside it. “So we’re thieves now?” he asked.

“It isn’t stealing,” said Iggy.

“We’re just borrowing these things for a while,” said Yugo. “We’ll put them all back tomorrow.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Despite Iggy's belief to the contrary, this *is* stealing. Section 459 of the *California Penal Code* provides, in part, as follows:

459. Every person who enters any house, room, apartment, tenement, shop, warehouse, store, mill, barn, stable, outhouse or other building ... with intent to commit grand or petit larceny or any felony is guilty of burglary.

A person convicted of burglary can be sentenced to a year in prison. Sam should also be concerned about s. 496 of the *Code*, which states that anyone who receives or possesses stolen property is also guilty of a crime and could receive another year in jail and a definite spot on the naughty list.

Sam closed the bag and passed it back to Iggy. “We’re going to spend Christmas in jail, I just know it,” he said.

“Don’t worry, Sam,” said Iggy. “It will all work out. It always does.”

The four friends continued down Santa Claus Lane. They stopped for more supplies at a grimy drug store and then visited with Eunice at the Beach Tavern, before they finally made their way back to Jamie’s camp on the beach.

Yugo looked out at the sun setting over the ocean. “It will be dark, soon,” he said. “We had better get ready.”



ABEL WISEMAN, AS HE DID EVERY DAY, closed his shop promptly at 6:00 PM and walked down the street to the Beach Tavern. He took his usual table in the corner and gave his usual order. He refilled his usual 4 or 5 more times before he returned unsteadily to the apartment above the Bait n’ Surf. He struggled a little to get his key in the doorknob, but he eventually worked the lock and stepped inside. His apartment was a modest one, with a tiny kitchen joined to a small living room with only two pieces of furniture in it: a worn red leather easy chair and a large flat screen television. There were no other chairs, for Abel never had company. He liked it that way. A door on the other side of the room led to his bedroom, where the only decor was an unmade bed and a heap of unwashed laundry.

He dropped his keys on a table by the door and fell into his leather chair. He picked up a remote control from the armrest and turned on the television. He expected to see a stream of sports highlights before he fell asleep in his chair or staggered off to bed, but the ghostly face of a woman appeared on the screen instead. He looked askance at his remote control, pointed it at the television and changed the channel. The ghostly visage remained. Then it spoke, low and long, “Abe-el Wise-man,” it said.

Abel changed the channel again, but to no avail. The face filled his screen and softly called his name again. He tossed the remote control aside and shouted at the screen, “who are you?”

“Ask me who I was,” said the face.

“Who were you, then?” Abel barked. There was a loud bang and everything went black. As the lights slowly came back up, a small figure stepped in front of the television.

It was Iggy, wearing a long white dress and a wig of thick brown hair. A length of chain they had secured from the hardware store was wrapped around his waist and made a jingling clanking noise when he moved. His face was painted

gleaming white, except for the blood red lipstick he wore. His costume was covered in glitter, which sparkled mystically in the black lights that Yugo had installed in the room that afternoon. Even now, Yugo sat hidden behind the leather chair, with a laptop computer open on the top of his lap. He pressed a few keys, sending wireless commands to the speakers tucked away behind the television.

Iggy raised his arms out in front of him and took a wobbly step towards Abel. Trying his best to play his part, Iggy moaned in a high, ghostly voice, "in life I was your wife, Jane Wiseman, dead these past seven Christmases."

"No yer not," snapped Abel. "Jane's gone. And there ain't no such thing as ghosts."

"Yet here I am before your eyes," said Iggy. "Don't you believe your own eyes?"

"Not after I've had a few at Eunice's," said Abel. "A little gin affects them. The whiskey makes them cheat. There's more wine than dyin' about you."

Throughout all of this, Yugo sat hidden behind the leather chair. He pressed a few keys on his laptop. There was a flash of light and a rumbling noise. Then, with another click of his mouse, all of the lights in the room gave off an eerie red glow.

"Ooooooooooh" cried Iggy, in his most ghostly manner. "Do you believe in me now?"

Abel backed away from him. "Yes, yes, yes," he mumbled. "I believe in you. But why do you torment me, Jane?"

Iggy broke character and smiled for a second. Their plan was working. The ghostly costume and Yugo's special effects had completely fooled him. Of course, the strange pills that Yugo had persuaded Eunice to slip into Abel's drinks had surely helped as well.

Iggy scowled. He raised the chain and shook it. "I am dooooooomed," he groaned. Yugo winced at Iggy's overacting. "Dooooomed to wear this chain and walk the Earth until you, Abel Wiseman, have changed your ways."

"What must I do?" asked Abel, trembling now. Yugo began pumping soft organ music into the room.

"Christmas, Abel," said Iggy, most mournfully. "You must celebrate Christmas again."

"Oh, Gobstoppers," grumbled Abel. "Christmas. I don't want nothin' to do with it."

"Ooooooooooh," Iggy howled again, waving his chain to yet more exaggerated effect. "But you must, or I am doooooomed!"

Yugo clicked a few keys and a chill filled the room. Abel shivered and said, "tell me what to do then."

“Mind me well, Abel Wiseman,” Iggy groaned. “You will be haunted this night by three spirits. Expect the first when the clock strikes one, the second when the clock strikes two, and the third when ... “

“When the clock strikes three,” interjected Abel. “I think I get it. But, how about we just have one and get it all over with at once.”

“Noooooooo!” Iggy howled. He was really enjoying this now. He even liked wearing the dress. He backed towards the television screen and shook his chain for the last time. “Expect the first when the clock strikes one,” he chanted. Then the room went black.

Iggy and Yugo slipped out in the darkness. When the lights came up again, Abel was left alone in the room, with nothing but his chair, his television and the strange message the ghost had given him. He shook his head. “Gobstoppers,” he said and wandered into his untidy bedroom. He suddenly felt extremely tired. It might have been the visit from the ghost, or more likely Eunice’s pills, but he could not stay awake any longer. He fell onto the tangled blankets and was asleep in a moment.



THE CLOCK STRUCK ONE. This was most unusual, as Abel had a digital alarm clock with no chimes. Nonetheless, at precisely 1:00 in the morning, his digital alarm clock rang out a single loud chime and then fell silent.

Abel sat up in his bed. He looked at the clock and made a puzzled frown. He felt dizzy and a little sick to his stomach. “I need to take better care of myself,” he muttered.

He looked at the alarm clock again and noticed a strange figure standing beside him. It had long white hair, like an old man, but its face was that of a child, without a wrinkle on it. It was dressed in a bright white body suit, with a thick gold belt around its waist. On his head, he wore a white cap that was surrounded by a halo of glowing white light.

It was Yugo, dressed in the manner of a Christmas ghost. He held a small remote control in his right hand that was hidden by the long sleeve of his white shirt. “I am the Ghost of Christmas Past,” he said.

“I figured as much,” said Abel. “What do you want with me?”

“Only your welfare,” said Yugo. He delivered his lines mechanically, and without Iggy’s dramatic flair. They would argue in later years about which of them had given the more convincing performance. Yugo held out his left arm. “Come with me, Abel Wiseman.”

Abel reached for Yugo's sleeve. As soon as his fingers touched it, Yugo pressed a button on his remote control and the room was filled with a bright white light.

His bedroom had changed. The heaps of dirty laundry were gone, and large white screens had been placed at different angles around the room. Yugo fumbled with the remote control and a picture was suddenly displayed on the screen behind him. It was a faded snapshot of a red haired boy, holding a toy airplane and standing in front of a large statue of Santa Claus.

"Hey, that's me," said Abel. "And that's the old statue of Santa Claus. The one they took down and moved to Oxnard. I haven't thought about that statue for years."

"Strange to have forgotten it," said Yugo woodenly.

"It was the tallest thing for miles around," said Abel. "There was a train, too." Yugo quickly touched a button on his remote control and another picture of young Abel appeared on the next screen, this time riding a children's train down the front of Santa Claus Lane.

"Yes, that's the one," said Abel, smiling. "It went all the way down the Lane and back again. It stopped right in front of Toyland and Santa's Kitchen. Those places are all gone now," he added sadly.

Yugo dimmed the lights in the room again. His thumb danced across the remote control. When he raised the lights again, something different was projected on each of the screens. There was a teenage Abel, with a young, brown haired girl walking hand in hand down the front of Santa Claus Lane. The buildings in the background seemed a little more faded than before, but the big Santa Claus statue was still there, waving at them from atop Santa's Trading Post. On the next screen, there was another picture of the young couple sharing a date shake in front of Santa's Village.

"Ha!" laughed Abel. "Those were the best date shakes in all of California. They tasted just like fig newtons."

The third screen showed the couple again, a little older this time, in an old video taken at a Christmas themed dance. They were slow dancing to an old version of *Last Christmas*.¹⁶ And on the last screen, a series of wedding pictures scrolled from one to the next. In one, a grown Abel, his hair still bright red, stood with his arm around the brown haired girl in her white wedding dress. In the next, they were cutting a wedding cake, and then sharing a toast with family and friends.

¹⁶ It is not known which version of *Last Christmas* is playing in this old video. According to the website www.last-christmas.com, there are 455 cover versions of the song as of this writing, so your guess is as good as anybody's.

Abel stood silently in front of this display and lowered his head. "I sure miss her," he said.

"Her name was Jane," said Yugo in his haunted monotone. "A delicate creature"

Abel nodded.

"There was a child," said Yugo. "A girl, I think." Yugo dimmed the lights once more. He fiddled with the remote control and now the screens were filled with home movies of a Christmas morning. Abel and the brown haired girl were older now. His red hair was flecked with gray. He beamed at a little girl, who might have been two or three, as she dashed across the room to a Christmas tree surrounded with a ring of brightly wrapped presents. She tore into the pile, scattering the boxes and shredding the paper.

Abel looked up at this scene. A tear traced down his weathered cheek. His voice cracked and he said, "that'll do ghost. I've seen enough."

"My time goes short," said Yugo. Another video began playing on the next screen. It showed the young family climbing aboard a sailboat. Abel helped his wife and daughter over the side and then hung a holly wreath over the stern.

As the boat pulled away from the dock, Abel turned on Yugo and shouted, "I said that'll do. Haunt me no longer!" He reached down and tore the cap and white wig from Yugo's head.

Yugo ducked down and scrambled with his remote control. Red, blue and green lights flashed wildly as he struggled for the button that would put the room back into darkness. A train whistle blew and monkeys squealed as Yugo stabbed randomly at the remote control. Wedding and baby pictures flickered haphazardly across the screens and then Yugo's finger finally landed on the right button and everything went black.

Yugo slipped through the bedroom door and into the living room where Iggy, Sam and Jamie were setting up the next scene. "That was a close one," he said.

"I'll say," said Iggy.

"How much time have we got?" asked Sam. He wore a large false beard and a red fur coat. Jamie was helping him place a small wreath on his head.

Yugo looked at his watch. "Not long," he said. "Everyone better get ready."

In the next room, Abel lifted up the glowing cap and wig. It was the only light in the room. He shook his head and set the cap down on the nightstand. The light slowly faded.

Abel felt tired again. He had barely reached his bed when he fell back into a deep sleep.



HE DIGITAL ALARM CLOCK STRUCK TWO, interrupting Abel in the middle of a bombastic snore. He sat up in bed, rubbed the sleep from his eyes and tried to put his thoughts together. He was not feeling quite so dizzy or nauseous as he had earlier, but was still troubled by what he imagined had been a most peculiar and disturbing dream.

He looked around his room. The heaps of laundry were all in their place and everything seemed to be as it should, except for a beam of light that shone beneath his bedroom door.

Thinking he had neglected to turn off the lights in the adjoining room, he stepped out of bed, pulled on his housecoat and opened the door.

It was his living room, but had had been completely transformed. The solitary chair was gone and in its place there was a table, covered with an enormous feast. A steaming turkey on a platter filled with roasted potatoes and stuffing was surrounded by bowls of colourful pears and luscious apples, piles of pies all stacked on top of dozens of bricks of fruitcake. Iggy, Yugo and Sam had found the fruitcakes at a grocery store, marked down to 5 cents a pound. Some of them appeared to be on their third or fourth Christmas, but the price was right and they bought them all.

At the head of the table, seated on a throne made out of hundreds of fruitcakes, was Sam. He was dressed in his red fur coat with a thick red beard and a holly wreath on his head. As Abel stepped through the door, Sam called out to him. "Come in. Come in and know me better, man!" Sam had studied his lines carefully and was determined to be the best ghost of them all.

Abel stepped timidly through the door and Sam bellowed, "Look upon me! I am the Ghost of Christmas Present!"

Abel looked around the room and then to Sam. The once spartan chamber was filled with garlands of tinsel, holly and mistletoe. Boughs of pine trees were spread around the room and each corner was stacked with other adornments, bric-a-brac and chintz. A sparkling Christmas tree stood in the middle of the room, its branches bending under the weight of hundreds of colourful ornaments. It looked like a room from a decorating magazine.

Abel hated decorating magazines.

"You've never seen anything like me before," Sam shouted. He was glad to play this ghost, it was always the shoutiest of the bunch.

"I reckon not," replied Abel.

"You've never seen my many brothers these past years?"

"You mean there's more of you?" asked Abel.

"Over two thousand," said Sam, and gave a jolly chortle.

“Tell me they aren’t all coming over tonight,” said Abel.

Sam laughed again, “ho, ho, ho.” It just felt right.

Abel looked at the feast and trappings spread over the long table. He wondered where it had all come from. For the most part, it had all been charged to Iggy’s North Pole Express™ credit card, which was frighteningly close to its limit. They had borrowed the table from Eunice at the Beach Tavern, on the strict understanding that they return it in one undamaged piece the next day.

“I’m not one fer Christmas dinners, you know,” said Abel.

“Everyone should be for Christmas dinner,” replied Sam. Sam was for every kind of dinner, especially when seconds and thirds were available. He liked Christmas dinner most of all, for seconds and thirds were not only available, they were in such ample supply that fourths and fifths were always a possibility.

“It’s just not for me,” said Abel.

“What of your friends? They are saving a seat for you at their Christmas table,” said Sam.

Iggy and Yugo, who were hiding under the table, sprang into action. They each pulled on a length of white cord and two large wooden cutout figures flipped up from the floor. On the front of the cutouts were pasted the pictures Yugo had taken of Big Jimmy and Fat Reg that afternoon. Once they were flipped into position, they appeared to be sitting across the table from Abel, ready to start their Christmas dinner.

Iggy pulled gently on the string. Big Jimmy’s arm moved up and down and his head moved stiffly from side to side. Iggy spoke, in his best imitation of Big Jimmy’s voice, “well Fat Reg, it’s time for Christmas dinner. Looks like everyone but Abel is here.”

Now Yugo took over. He mimicked Fat Reg quite well, though his delivery was flat. “Oh, Big Jimmy, you know that Abel won’t be coming,” he said. “He says that Christmas is just a gobstopper.”

“Christmas a gobstopper?” exclaimed Iggy in Big Jimmy’s voice. He pulled back and forth on the white cord and Big Jimmy’s arm waved wildly. “I never heard no such nonsense, never.”

“He said it all the same,” replied wooden Fat Reg woodenly. “And, he believed it, too.”

“He’s a crusty one all right. Crusty as the mayor of Crustytown,” said the cutout of Big Jimmy.

“He’s too crusty for his own darn good,” said wooden Fat Reg. “He won’t join us, and so he misses a fine dinner, some fine drink and some fine companions.”

“Well, I hope the crusty old feller has a merry Christmas in spite of himself,” said the cutout of Big Jimmy.

“Here, here,” said wooden Fat Reg.

“Here, here,” echoed Sam from his fruitcake throne. He raised a big goblet and then took a deep swig from it.

“What’s that yer drinking?” asked Abel.

“It’s the milk of human goodness,” said Sam. It was actually one of Eunice’s double vodka cranberry paralyzers. “You should try it sometime.”

“I’ll pass, thanks,” muttered Abel. “I think I’ve already had enough tonight.” Abel felt like a haze had been lifting in the last hour and he had begun to think more clearly. He had no wish to muddle his head again the way it had already been muddled.

“This isn’t the only Christmas supper you’ll miss this year,” said Sam. During this exchange, Iggy and Yugo had pulled down the cutouts of Big Jimmy and Fat Reg. Around the end of the table they propped up cutouts of three of the regulars from the Beach Tavern, and one of Eunice sliding in behind them, carrying a tray of drinks and dressed in a low cut Mrs. Claus outfit. “Even the boys at the Tavern are celebrating Christmas.”

On cue, Iggy and Yugo began rocking the wooden cutouts from side to side, while a recording played of the world weary crew at the Beach Tavern singing a spirited, though off key, version of *God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen*¹⁷ played from hidden speakers. It cost Iggy three rounds of drinks to get them all to sing a Christmas carol for them, but he felt the result had been worth it.

The cutouts reached the final discordant tidings of comfort and joy. Then Eunice’s voice could clearly be heard shouting “All right, you’ve had your fun, now get out of here,” before Yugo could turn off the recording.

Abel looked quizzically at the Eunice cutout. Yugo manipulated her closer to the table and then mimicked Eunice’s voice and said, “God bless us, everyone!”

"Snort," snorted Abel, crossing his arms.

“My time grows short,” interjected Sam.

“So, you’ll be leaving then?” asked Abel.

“I fear so,” said Sam solemnly.

¹⁷ Many people are confused about the meaning of this carol. It does not refer to a group of merry gentlemen, because there is a comma between the words ‘merry’ and ‘gentlemen’. The carollers are actually imploring the gentlemen of the title to *be* merry. This suggests that they were actually crusty gentlemen, not merry ones, and needed to improve their attitudes.

“And will you be taking all of this ...,” he gestured at the table and the cutouts, “with you when you go?”

“Uh oh,” Iggy whispered to Yugo under the table. “I think he’s coming out of it.”

Now, the plan at this point was for Yugo to dim the lights with his remote control. The Ghost of Christmas Present would disappear in the darkness. Then the apartment door would open to reveal Jamie, dressed in a black hooded robe as the Ghost of Christmas Future. Jamie would lead Abel down a dark and empty Santa Claus Lane to the beach, where they had erected a single gravestone with Abel’s name upon it. Jamie would point silently to the gravestone, Abel would read his name there, rediscover the spirit of Christmas and Iggy, Yugo and Sam would have made their Christmas magic.

That was how the story went and that was how it was supposed to work out. But life does not always work out like it does in stories. And stories do not always work out like they do in stories.

Abel shook his head and stared at Sam. “I do know you,” he said. He reached up and pulled the beard from Sam’s face.

“Kill the lights!” Iggy said to Yugo. Yugo let go of the rope he was holding to find his remote control. The Eunice cutout fell backwards to the floor.

“You’re that fat kid that was in my shop yesterday,” said Abel. “You and your friends were prattling on about Christmas. Where are those other two?” Abel looked from side to side.

Iggy shoved Yugo, who promptly dropped the remote control. He was still searching for it when Abel’s face appeared under the table, staring at them.

“There you are!” he growled. He reached down and pulled Iggy and Yugo out from under the table. He held them at eye level and shouted, “what do you mean by slipping me a Mickey Finn¹⁸ and then coming into my house in the dead of night and tormenting me?” He shook the two boys and their legs and arms flapped wildly.

“Urk,” said Iggy. He could not speak with Abel’s grip on his collar.

“Blergh,” said Yugo.

Sam did not like the urks and the blerghs he was hearing. He quietly slipped down from the fruitcake throne and headed for the door. Abel turned and glared at Sam as he opened the door on Jamie, who was outside in full costume waiting for his/her cue to enter.

¹⁸ A “Mickey Finn” is a slang term for a drink that is spiked with some sort of a drug. It is named for a Chicago bartender named Michael Finn, who once ran the Lone Star Saloon on South State Street. He went to prison for drugging his customers’ drinks and then robbing them once they were unconscious. Michael Finn was kind of a jerk.

“Another one!” yelled Abel. He threw Iggy and Yugo to the ground and stormed over to the door. He pulled Sam aside and grabbed Jamie by the arm. “And just who are you?”

He pulled back Jamie’s black hood. His eyes opened wide and his head jerked back. His face was as white as North Pole snow. “It can’t be,” he murmured.

Jamie looked up at Abel, eyes wide with recognition. Iggy and Yugo were struggling to their feet and rubbing their throats, but now they could see it, too. The face in the old pictures and home movies they had seen was older now, and a little thinner, but the resemblance was unmistakable.

“Told you Jamie was a girl,” said Sam.

Indeed, she was definitely a she and not a he at all. Even though they lived only a short distance apart, in all those years Jamie had never set foot in the Bait ‘n Surf and Abel had never returned to the sea where he had lost his family. Still, they knew each other at once. And as Abel Wiseman looked down into the face of the daughter he had lost seven Christmas Eves before, it happened.

A shimmering red wave of Christmas magic burst out around them, sweeping over Iggy, Yugo and Sam. It sounded like peppermint and tasted like jingle bells. Christmas magic can be that way. They felt the change at once. With two soft pops, Iggy’s ears sharpened to points. Yugo’s familiar black moustache exploded from his face, fully grown. And as for Sam, well on Santa Claus Lane they say, that Sam’s small waist grew twelve sizes that day.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam looked at each other. They had made some Christmas magic of their own and they were elves once more.



IT WAS A SUNNY CHRISTMAS EVE MORNING on Santa Claus Lane. Iggy, Yugo and Sam stepped out of Abels’ apartment and made their way down the dusty road. Most of the shops were closed, but the Beach Tavern was open for breakfast. Eunice waved as they walked by and called out, “Merry Christmas.” She was dressed in a short skirt and a tight tank top that said ‘kiss my mistletoe.’ Iggy shuddered and waved back.

Abel and Jamie had talked all night, about sailboats and elephant seals and how nice it was to be a family again. They spoke about the little shop and that maybe it would be a good idea to bring a little Christmas back to Santa Claus Lane. And they would, for the very next week, the Bait ‘n Surf reopened as the Bait ‘n Surf ‘n Christmas Shoppe, Abel and Jamie Wiseman, proprietors. The little beach girl had come home.

The elves were walking along the sea wall at the end of the block when they were startled by a loud laugh. “Ho, ho, ho.”

They slowly turned and found themselves face to face with a large sweaty man dressed in his red fur jacket, fur toque and heavy black boots. It was scarcely appropriate for a warm California morning.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam quickly pulled off their pointed velvet caps and lowered their eyes. Santa Claus put his hands on his waist and bent forward, “I’ve been looking for you three everywhere,” he said. “I believe you have something that belongs to me.”

He looked up and the three elves followed his gaze to where the big sled and eight reindeer were parked at the side of the road.

“I’m going to need that tonight, you know,” said Santa Claus.

Iggy cleared his throat. “We can explain ...” he began.

Santa raised a red mittened hand. “There’s no need for that,” he said. “I’m perfectly aware of what you three have been up to. Stealing my sled. Breaking into houses¹⁹ and stealing property.²⁰ Drugging that man,²¹ impersonating his late wife²² and putting him through dreadful horrors for half the night. I must say that the three of you have been very naughty boys indeed.”

He placed his arm on Iggy’s shoulder. “You did good,” he said.

“Well,” said Yugo.

Santa Claus looked at him.

“We did well, you mean” said Yugo.

“Don’t push your luck,” said Santa Claus. Then he walked up to his sled and patted the lead reindeer on the nose. “I’ve brought you something.”

He pointed to a spot a little ways down the road. Parked behind an old Impala was a gleaming red snowmobile. Yugo’s gleaming red snowmobile.

Yugo ran down the block and flipped open the door. He climbed into the snowmobile and sat behind the wheel. It was his snowmobile all right, and it was just as he remembered it. All of his modifications and inventions were there. The lithium fusion reactor, the satellite dish, the waffle maker. It was

¹⁹ *California Penal Code*, s. 459.

²⁰ *California Penal Code*, s. 484.

²¹ *California Penal Code*, ss. 222 and 347.

²² *California Penal Code*, s. 529.

all there, as good as new. Christmas miracles really do work in strange and mysterious ways.

“Happy Christmas, boys,” said Santa Claus. He clapped his hands together and added, “now, get back home and get to work!”

Iggy and Sam climbed into the snowmobile behind Yugo. The doors slid shut on their smooth hydraulics and the powerful 70 cylinder engine roared to life. The snowmobile pulled out onto Santa Claus Lane and picked up speed as two shining red wings extended from either side. It rose up into the air and then banked out over the beach.

Santa Claus watched as it climbed into the air and drove out of sight. He shook his head and said, “elves will be elves.”