

A CHRISTMAS MYSTERY

-OR-

ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS IS A CRAFTSMAN POWER SAW

I

Those of you who have read some of the adventure of Iggy, Yugo and Sam are no doubt aware of the wonderful snowmobile invented by Yugo and which is driven on wondrous travels each Christmas. Yugo was, of course, quite attached to it. He tinkered with it all week long and puttered about it on weekends.

It is, of course, a most remarkable machine. To say it is simply a snowmobile is like saying that Santa Claus is just a fat guy with a beard. The snowmobile is so much more; spaceship, submarine, time machine: virtually anything at all at the press of a green button or the pull of a blue lever.

It was equipped with a plexi-glass cabin for comfort of its passengers. The rest is gleaming red metal, with sleek yellow stripes across the doors. At the front are two sturdy skis; at the rear are large wheels with deep rubber treads. The snowmobile is at home scooting across the bleak northern frontier or the black inky void of interplanetary space.

Yugo had, as usual, been making a few modifications to the snowmobile. He was working on the strato-rammincaster and the lithium fusion reactor. The dinner bell rang, calling all of the elves to the mess hall for supper. The mess hall was aptly named, as elves are perhaps the sloppiest eaters in all of creation. Though Yugo, who had once seen an abominable snowman eat, might disagree. Yugo arrived late, as usual, and looked around for his friends, Iggy and Sam.

Of all the elves, Sam was unquestionably the messiest of the lot. If you chanced to ask him why he ate with his hands instead of a fork, he would probably look at you with an expression of total confusion such as you might expect if you had said, "Sam, how would you like to set your head on fire?"

Yugo found his friends at the end of the fourth table where Sam was already through his main course and was pushing fistfuls of Jell-O™ into his mouth and, to a lesser degree, up his nose. Iggy and Sam were sitting with another elf named Porko. Porko was a husky fellow. Actually, the word 'husky' is perhaps too polite.

“How’s the snowmobile?” asked Iggy as Yugo took his seat. “Did you fix the problem with the strammincaster?”

“Strato-rammincaster,” corrected Yugo. “Yes, I think it is all worked out.”

“I don’t want to know about it,” said Sam. “The last time I was in that thing, I almost got killed.”

“You still haven’t forgiven me for that ejector seat accident, have you?” asked Yugo.

“No, and I don’t think I ever will,” replied Sam, rubbing his backside.

“Oh Sam,” said Porko, “you’re just being silly. I think it would be marvellous to have a snowmobile like Yugo’s.”

Yugo laughed. “I don’t think I would go that far,” he said.

“Sure it is,” Porko went on, “Your snowmobile can do anything!” With that, Porko got up from the table to gather some more deserts. Sam returned to his desert with his customary gusto. Iggy winced at his friend’s eating habits. Sam was at that moment spooning macaroni onto his ice cream and eating the concoction with his fingers.

After supper, the three elves went for a walk outside the workshop. All of the elves would be returning to work soon, as it was only two days until Christmas, and there were still about ten million train sets to complete before the big day. Yugo loved working on the mechanical trains. Sam could take it or leave it, though he preferred to leave it. Perhaps on a tree stump on the far side of Jupiter.

On their way to the workshop they passed the little shack where Yugo would work on the snowmobile in his spare time. It had been snowing most of the day.

“It snows all the time,” thought Sam. “Why didn’t Santa set up shop in Bermuda?”

As I was saying, before Sam interrupted, it had been snowing most of the day. That is why Yugo thought that it was so strange that there were fresh tire tracks leading out of the shack. The snowmobile had been parked there all day – surely any old tracks should be buried in snow by now. Yugo looked inside the shack.

He immediately understood why the tire tracks appeared so fresh.

The snowmobile was gone!



“Someone stole the snowmobile!” yelled Sam, perhaps a little bit too happily.

“Now, let’s not jump to conclusions,” cautioned Iggy. “Just because the snowmobile is gone does not mean that it was stolen.”

“But where could it have gone?” asked Yugo, on the verge of tears. Those who knew Yugo could scarcely imagine him without his snowmobile.

Sam’s face lit up like a 5000-watt floodlight. “I know what happened,” he announced. “It’s elementary!”

“What’s elementary?” asked Iggy.

“Who did it. It is simply a matter of deduction,” said Sam, with a superior tone in his voice.

“Who then?” asked Yugo.

Sam grinned smugly and crossed his arms. “It was Porko Porkpie, the elf,” declared Sam.

“That’s ridiculous,” said Iggy. “Porko is our friend. He would never steal the snowmobile.”

“And besides that,” said Yugo. “Porko was with us in the mess hall. He couldn’t have done it.”

“But don’t you remember how he said it would be marvellous to own the snowmobile? And how he left the table early?” Sam asked rhetorically, crossing his arms for effect.

“Oh, this is silly,” said Iggy.

“I don’t know,” said Yugo. “Maybe Sam is on to something. We never saw Porko after he went for those deserts.”

“But you still don’t have any proof,” said Iggy. “How can you be so sure that Porko took the snowmobile?”

“There is only one way to be sure,” said Sam. “We have to go see Santa Claus. He knows everything. He will be able to tell us.”

“Santa Claus! Of course,” said Yugo. “If anyone can tell us who stole the snowmobile, he can.” With that, the three elves made their way from the shack to the building at the centre of the compound where Santa Claus lived.

Santa’s house looked exactly like you would expect it to look. Assuming, that is, that you always pictured Santa’s house as a 24-story steel and glass building that reflected the icy snowscape from each of its thousands of windows, because that is exactly what it was. Santa himself lived in a two-story penthouse on the top floors. The remaining floors were devoted to the administration of Santa’s vast toy making and distribution empire. There was a floor devoted to research and development, another that dealt with public relations, where nearly 15 tonnes of mail was handled each day and another, which contained the gigantic computer mainframe that continually monitored the children of the world to determine whom been naughty, and who had been nice.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam crossed the lobby to the high-speed elevator that serviced the upper floors. There was a receptionist sitting at a large wooden desk in front of the elevator.

“Hold it right there, boys,” she barked, as Iggy reached for the elevator call button. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“We need to see Santa Claus right away,” said Iggy.

“Do you have an appointment?” the Receptionist inquired, in a voice that was one third honey and two-thirds battery acid.

“Uh, no,” said Yugo. “But it’s an emergency.”

“I can’t let anyone in to see him without an appointment,” said the Receptionist. “Even if your snowmobile is missing.”

“We’d like to make an appointment then,” said Iggy.

“Very good.” The Receptionist opened her large appointment book and ran her finger down the page. “The next appointment is July 15th.”

“But today is December 23rd!” cried Yugo. “We can’t wait nearly 7 months.”

“And it is an emergency,” Iggy added.

“I’m terribly sorry,” said the Receptionist, although all three of them could see that she was not even a little bit sorry. “Santa is in the Central Control Room on the 22nd floor and he cannot possibly be disturbed this close to Christmas. He’s making his list and checking it twice. Now, why don’t you boys run along and build an igloo or something.”

Sam watched this exchange with increasing irritation. He could not stand it any longer. “Look lady,” he bellowed. “We’re here on important and top secret Christmas business that we don’t have time to explain to low level bureaucrats like you. Now either you let us in to see the Big Guy right now, or we won’t be responsible for the consequences. And believe me, there can’t be too many other places north of the Arctic Circle looking for receptionists right now!” Sam had planned to continue screaming for another two or three paragraphs, but he did not have to; the receptionist had fainted.

The three elves quickly piled into the waiting elevator before the Receptionist could recover. The elevator streaked to the 22nd floor and the elves stepped out into the Central Control Room. This was the nerve centre of Santa Claus’ enterprise. It was filled with computer terminals and large aeronautic maps and weather charts. The only significant absence from the room was Santa Claus himself. He was nowhere to be found.

“She said he was up here,” whispered Yugo. “Where can he be?”

“Maybe he is on another floor,” suggested Iggy. The elves went up to the penthouse, but Santa was not there. They did find Mrs. Claus there, but she chased them out with a broom. You would have done the same thing if three elves had walked into the room while you were taking a bath.

It was the same story on all of the other stories. Lots of machinery with blinking lights that made plinking noises, but no Santa Claus. They returned to the lobby a little confused and a little frightened. It was only two days until Christmas and Santa Claus had disappeared without a trace!

“You again!” a voice screamed from behind them. It was the voice you might expect from a kindergarten teacher with a nasty rash that kept her up at night. It was the Receptionist.

The elves turned around slowly. She stood there, one hand on her hips, her blue hair slightly askew. Their eyes strayed to her other hand, which held a large baseball bat. Sam groaned at the irony; it was a bat he had made himself about two weeks before. She twirled the bat like a World Series champion and stepped towards the elves.

“Let’s get out of here!” the elves shouted in unison and they sped out through the revolving door and into the snow outside. Unfortunately for the Receptionist, her bat jammed in the revolving door, wedging it shut with her inside. She cursed so hard that the windows on the door fogged over and the snow outside began to melt.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam walked slowly into the compound. Santa Claus was missing. And with the snowmobile gone, what hope did they have of finding him in time for Christmas?

II

The three elves stood in the doorway of the little shack where the snowmobile used to be parked. Their plan was to follow the tracks leading out of the shack in the hope they would lead to the snowmobile. Yugo had a large flashlight, which he had fashioned from some wire, two nickels and a bit of cork. It was not very bright, but it did the job. The tracks headed south out of the shack. Of course, when someone starts at the North Pole, every trail seems to lead south.

After about 100 metres, the tracks began weaving from side to side. “Whoever was driving this was a maniac,” remarked Iggy.

“I just hope the steering system isn’t broken,” said Yugo. “The new strato-rammincer still needs some fine tuning.”

The tracks swung from side to side then doubled back on themselves. Then the tracks just ended. It was as if a great glowing hand had reached down from heaven, picked up the snowmobile and placed it on a bookshelf somewhere.

“Well, that’s it,” said Iggy. “Without the radar tracking system in the snowmobile, we’ll never be able to find Santa in time.”

The three heavyhearted elves made their way back to the Elves Barracks at the south end of the compound. They were greeted by 2997 other heavyhearted elves. By now, the news of Santa’s disappearance had reached every pointy ear at the North Pole.

Hardly anyone slept that night. So, early the next morning, Iggy, Yugo and Sam set out to find Santa Claus without the snowmobile. It was too dark to make much progress, but there was no point waiting, the sun was not due to rise until March 12th.

They were at the edge of the compound, looking under a snow bank when they ran into Porko Porkpie.

“You!” shouted Sam, grabbing Porko by the jacket and lifting him into the air. This was no small feat given Porko’s considerable mass. “Where’s the snowmobile?” he demanded.

“What?” asked Porko, his face bulging out even more than usual.

“Where did you hide it, you thief?” Sam went on, shining the cork and wire flashlight in Porko’s face.

“Ack – gack” gacked Porko. “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Talk you bandit. Spill it,” Sam yelled even louder, shaking Porko back and forth.

“Oh Sam, cut it out,” said Iggy. “It’s obvious Porko doesn’t know anything.”

“Sam glared at Porko, who was rubbing his throat. “Where were you after dinner last night?” he asked.

“In the workshop,” answered Porko. “Right where I was supposed to be.”

“Prove it,” challenged Sam.

“How do you expect me to do that?” asked Porko. “I already told you, I don’t know anything about it!”

“I have an idea,” said Iggy, snapping his long fingers. “We’ll use the gigantic computer mainframe at headquarters. It keeps track of everything. It will, tell us where the snowmobile went!”

“Of course,” said Yugo, slapping his forehead with the heel of his hand. “Why didn’t we think of it before?”

The four of them raced back to the 24-story Santa Claus Tower. They were just entering when they saw the grim, glaring, grinning grimace of the Receptionist.

“Oh no!” cried Iggy. “We’ll never get past her again. The Receptionist grinned an evil grin through the window. The elves turned and ran. When they reached Yugo’s shack, they stopped to catch their breath.

“I have an idea how we might get in,” said Yugo.

“What’s that?” asked Iggy hopefully.

“Just something new that I have been working on.”

“Oh no,” said Sam. “Not another contraption.” Yugo walked over to the wall of the shack and pulled down something that looked like a mutated bicycle. Of course, since Yugo had built it, it was no ordinary bicycle. It had wide canvas wings hanging from either side and what looked to be a propeller mounted to the front handlebars. It was long enough for three elves to sit on it and pedal. Iggy, Yugo and Sam (who put up a bit of a fight) climbed on and started pedalling. As they pedalled, the big canvas wings began flapping up and down and the propeller started to spin. Iggy gasped with astonishment as the remarkable bicycle climbed into the air.

The elves pedalled harder, and soon they were gliding a hundred metres above the ground.

Yugo swung the bicycle towards the Santa Claus Tower. He stopped just outside a twentieth floor window that had been left open. “Iggy,” he shouted. “The computer is on this floor. Jump in!”

Iggy gulped hard, closed his eyes and jumped off of the bicycle and into the open window. He landed on the white linoleum floor with a thump and slid towards the computer. He got up, dusted off his red velvet jacket and walked to the keyboard.

He pressed a few buttons and called up the “Naughty or Nice” program. This was the software that Santa Claus used to determine which children had been good the year before. He typed in the name “PORKO PORKPIE” and pressed “ENTER”. The screen went blank for a moment and then the word “NICE” appeared in large friendly letters.

“I guess that confirms that Porko had nothing to do with the disappearance of the snowmobile,” thought Iggy. “If he had taken it, surely the computer would have called him naughty.”

Then, just for fun, he typed his own name. Again, the word “NICE” appeared on the screen in large friendly letters. He typed in Yugo and Sam as well and was relieved to learn that they were both nice, although the computer had to think a bit about Sam.

Then he had an idea. He turned off the ‘Naughty or Nice’ program and keyed in Santa’s navigational program. A series of maps filled the screen. Iggy typed in the word ‘SNOWMOBILE’. A few maps flashed by and then stopped on a part of the Arctic ice cap that was so cold even the polar bears shied away from it.

There, in a spot where the sun shone maybe once in a hundred years, was a softly glowing 'X', marking the location of the snowmobile.

"How did the snowmobile get there?" pondered Iggy. He pressed the 'PRINT' key and a copy of the map scrolled out of the computer. Iggy took it and turned back to the window. Outside, Yugo and Sam were still pedalling furiously. Iggy carefully stepped back out onto the bicycle and they flew back down to the shack.

Iggy explained his findings: that Porko was innocent, that Sam was actually nice and where the snowmobile could be found. He passed the map to Yugo. Yugo nodded with determination and turned the bicycle towards the spot marked on the map. A cruel north wind had just begun to blow. It was an especially cruel wind. The kind old folks describe when they talk about the way winter used to be when they were kids. That cruel.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam just grit their chattering teeth together and pressed on. They needed to get to the snowmobile fast, there were only twelve hours left until Christmas and there was still no sign of Santa Claus.

They pedalled a ways and Sam suddenly shouted "Aha!" Iggy and Yugo turned to look at him. "Now I know who stole the snowmobile. It's so obvious!"

"Oh who do you think it was this time," laughed Iggy, "Santa Claus?"

"Of course not," said Sam. "It was that horrible receptionist."

"The Receptionist? Why would she steal the snowmobile?" asked Yugo.

"It's elementary," began Sam. "First, we know that she hates elves. Second, she tried to keep us from seeing Santa Claus about it. And third, and most important, do you remember when we arrived earlier to see Santa; she said 'I don't care if your snowmobile is missing.' Like she knew all about it."

"Hmmm," hmmmmed Iggy. "Maybe you are onto something this time."

"We'll have to run her through the computer when we get back," said Yugo.

"I'm pretty sure it won't say nice in large friendly letters," laughed Iggy.

The wind picked up again. Now it was the kind of wind that even made old folks look up and take notice before mumbling something about the winter of 1912.

Soon the elves were so cold they started to look like delicately detailed ice sculptures such as you might see decorating a banquet table. Sam tried not to think of banquet tables, they only made him think of banquets and that made him hungry. Yugo was whistling Sam's favourite Christmas carol, *I'll Be Home For*

Christmas, So You'd Better Bake a Cake, and this was only making Sam hungrier. He struggled to push these thoughts from his mind and kept pedalling.

Suddenly, a large white object brushed past the bicycle. "Oh no!" shouted Iggy. "Ice bats! Cover your head!" Another white shape flashed past the other side of the bicycle.

There were five ice bats altogether and they slowly circled the bicycle. The ice bats were each about two metres long with a wingspan of twice that figure. They were pure white with gleaming red eyes that glowed in the dark. Their leathery wings oozed a foul smelling yellow fluid. One ice bat turned to Sam and opened its mouth. Its teeth were icicles, clear frozen points of ice that looked to Sam to have been designed for the sole purpose of chewing elves to pieces.

"Keep pedalling!" Yugo screamed. The bicycle was losing altitude. Sam tried to pedal, but found that his cold knees were shaking so much from fright that they just would not move properly anymore.



"Come on, Sam!" yelled Iggy. "We're almost there. Don't stop now!"

But Sam could not pedal any more and the bicycle began a long slow spiral to the ground. They crashed into a pile of light fluffy snow. The ice bats swarmed about them then sped in for the kill.

Yugo looked about frantically. Iggy looked about desperately. Sam looked to be about as frightened as an elf could look. He was too cold to be either frantic or desperate.

"Look over there," pointed Iggy. Yugo squinted and saw a thin blue column of smoke swirling in the wind.

"Let's go," he said. "There may be someone there who can help us."

They stumbled towards the spot where the smoke was rising. Iggy dragged Sam while Yugo threw snowballs to keep the ice bats at bay. The ice bats were getting closer with each pass and it was only a matter of time before they would be enjoying a nice lunch of chilled elf.

The elves reached the fire that was making the smoke. A large older man was huddled close to the fire for warmth. "Help," called the elves together, over the

squawking cries of the ice bats. The old man turned and looked at them, surprised to see another living thing in such a cold and lonely part of the world. The elves fell over themselves in astonishment as the light of the fire fell on the old man's face.

"Santa Claus," croaked Iggy. His voice could barely be heard above the ice bats, which were practically upon them.

"Hello boys," chuckled Santa Claus, his green eyes twinkling in the firelight. "You seem to be having some problems with some ice bats."

Santa Claus stood up and waved his arms at the ice bats. Twinkling specks of powder flew from his mittens. The moment the powder reached the ice bats they melted into floating drops of water that fell like rain onto the snow. The powder fell onto the elves and at once Sam felt warm and happy again.

"Wow, what was that?" he asked.

"Oh, just a little Christmas magic," said Santa Claus. He knelt to embrace the three elves. "Come," he said to Yugo. "I have something to show you." He led the elves to a large white snow covered lump a little ways from the fire. He brushed away some of the snow, revealing ...

"My snowmobile" squealed Yugo with delight. It was indeed, Yugo's snowmobile, turned over on one side and buried in the snow.

Sam gasped in disbelief. "You stole the snowmobile!"

Santa laughed heartily, "ho ho ho. Not exactly. You might say that the snowmobile stole me."

Sam looked at him blankly.

"You see," began Santa Claus. "I was on my way back to the workshop yesterday to oversee the evening shift when I walked past the shack where Yugo keeps his snowmobile. All of the elves were in the mess hall and there was no one else around. I noticed that someone had left the lights of the snowmobile on."

Yugo blushed. He was always forgetting to turn off the headlights. It drained the batteries and he was forever jump-starting the snowmobile with a pocket nuclear reactor he had developed.

Santa continued, "I decided to turn out the lights so the battery would not wear down. I climbed into the snowmobile and looked for the switch. I never imagined that there were so many coloured switches and buttons on the dashboard. I was about to give up when I noticed a small button with a flashing blue light. I figured that was the light switch, so I pressed it. But it wasn't. It was the ... "

“... ignition switch,” finished Yugo.

“Yes indeed,” laughed Santa Claus. “I pressed the button and the snowmobile blasted out of the shack. I tried to turn it off, but I did not know how, so I just started swerving and driving in circles. I pulled on a green lever which I hoped was the brake, but it was the ... “

“... helicopter mode,” said Yugo.

“Yes, and then the snowmobile just took off into the air. I did everything I could to stop it and it finally crashed here. I climbed out and built this fire so I could warm up before walking back. I tried to start the snowmobile up again, but I haven’t been able to make it go. Thank goodness you fellows arrived.”

They walked over to the snowmobile and the four of them managed to right it. It was a little battered from Santa’s frantic ride. Yugo pressed the start button, but nothing happened. He sighed, and then walked around to the front of the snowmobile. He lifted the hood and began tinkering with the engine.

“This always happens when I go places with you guys,” grumbled Sam.

Yugo worked on the snowmobile for some time. Then he stood back and pulled the little nuclear reactor from his pocket. He wired it up to the lithium fusion chamber and turned it on.

“This will either boost it or blow us all up,” Sam winced. The engine of the snowmobile turned over and hummed to life. Santa and the elves climbed in and Yugo punched the blue button. The snowmobile streaked back to the North Pole. In only a few minutes, they were gliding back into the compound. Yugo parked in front of the Santa Claus building.

A few elves had begun loading Santa’s sleigh in the desperate hope that he would return in time for Christmas. They doubled their efforts when they saw Santa Claus step out of the snowmobile.

Sam stepped out behind Santa and joined with the elves loading the sleigh. He bumped into Porko when he bent over to pick up a sack of creepy mutant toys that were going to prove very popular that Christmas. Porko glared at him.

“Aw gee,” said Sam. “I’m awfully sorry I accused you of stealing the snowmobile.” He gulped and slowly put out his hand. “Can we still be friends?”

Porko looked at Sam, smiled and shook his hand. “Of course. It’s Christmas.”

The sleigh was loaded now and Santa Climbed on top. He looked at his watch and frowned. “It’s too late!” he said. “I’ll never get all these toys delivered before morning.”

It was true. The sun would be rising in Australia in a little over an hour. Santa's sleigh was very fast and it was enchanted with Christmas magic, but this was an impossible task, even for Santa. The elves hung their heads. Despite everything they had done, Santa would not finish his deliveries on time.

"Why not?" shouted Yugo. "Why can't we help?" He called to some of the other elves to start loading sacks into the snowmobile. Then he yelled up to Santa, "you cover everything in the north, we'll go south!" Santa nodded and passed a list that was about 4000 pages long.

"Ho ho ho, that's all the good little girls and boys you need to see. Good luck!"

Yugo gasped. Then, with a hearty, "On Dasher, On Dancer, ..." Santa's sleigh lurched forward and floated into the sky.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam piled into the snowmobile. It was crammed full of toys. There were toys on seats, on the roof and in a little trailer Yugo had hitched to the back. Sam looked out the window at the other elves. His eyes stopped on Porko. He rolled down his window and yelled out, "come on, get in, we need all of the help we can get!"

Porko smiled and stuffed his rather puffy bulk into the seat next to Sam. The air seemed to shimmer with little specks of glittering powder. "Christmas magic," whispered Iggy. Yugo punched the blue button and they shot into the northern sky like a comet.

III

The sun was rising all over the world when Iggy, Yugo and Sam made it back to the North Pole. They were tired and sore but all in all very happy. They stumbled through the lobby of the Santa Claus building to let Santa know they had finished delivering the toys to every boy and girl south of the Equator. They had many thrills and adventures during their long night's journey, but that is a story for another time.

Iggy walked up to the elevator and pressed the call button. "Ha!" screamed a scheming, dark and creepy voice from behind them. They spun around and found themselves face to face with the Receptionist, who was raising her bat again, like a major league slugger gone slightly mad.

It was Sam who reacted first. He reached into the sack of spare toys he had brought in from the snowmobile and pulled out a creepy mutant doll and a new baseball hat. "Merry Christmas," he said, offering the two items to the Receptionist. He was about to say, "Merry Christmas you old bat," but Iggy poked him in the ribs before he could finish.

Sparkling glitter seemed to fill the air. The Receptionist took the cap and placed it on her stack of curly blue hair. She lowered the bat and held the creepy mutant doll close.

They say that Christmas magic is easiest to find on December 25th and that miracles happen more often on that day than on any other. This Christmas morning a little miracle of a sort happened. For a single sparkling moment, the Receptionist's heart, normally a hard lump of coal was pressed and shaped into a glittering diamond.

Then she threw the creepy mutant doll in the air, and took a great swing at it with her bat. The doll flew across the lobby. She chased after it to pick it up and clobber it back. For the first time since that awful winter of 1912, the Receptionist smiled.

The elevator arrived. Iggy, Yugo, Sam and Porko raced in before the Receptionist could get back.