

# A Feast of Fools

*Iggy, Yugo, Sam  
Had 'citement and 'venture and  
Saved Christmas again*

-Christmas haiku.  
Author unknown.

I

There are few people familiar with the North Pole. After all, it is about 5000 kilometres off the tourist trail and has no regular air, rail or bus service. The only reliable way in and out of the Pole is by flying reindeer. Since no major carrier maintains a commercially viable herd<sup>1</sup>, outsiders rarely travel above the Arctic Circle.

Little is written of the sights to be seen there. Most authors tell of the snow, ice and wind chill factor. Reams of pages are devoted to the endless night, the bitter cold and the almost total absence of proper toilet facilities.

So, let us take a journey of the imagination to the North Pole. As we approach the Pole from the south (there is no other way to approach the North Pole), we pass acres and acres of shifting ice floes, lazy polar bears and the occasional puffin. But as we reach the top of the world, the scattered lights of a little city come into view.

There are over 30,000 elves who live in Christmas town, building toys for Santa Claus and administering his vast gift distribution system. Most of the elves live in neat rows of barracks arranged in concentric circles around the Pole. Closer to the Pole, there is a long paved runway, which stretches out from a large wooden stable.

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<sup>1</sup> A herd of reindeer is also called a "leash". I bet you did not know that, did you?

Inside a group of elves are tending to Santa's leash of reindeer and keeping his sleigh in perfect trim.

Beyond the stables are a series of squat buildings occupied by various manufacturing units. Three of these buildings are devoted exclusively to the construction and storage of little metal cars. Others house doll makers, train makers and various other toys your Dad can assemble himself on Christmas morning.

At the end of our journey, precisely at the geographic North Pole, is the most magnificent sight in the Arctic. Rising 24 stories above the surrounding snowdrifts is the gleaming steel and glass office tower that houses the nerve centre of Santa Claus' business.

The top floor is occupied by the executive offices, assorted vice-presidents, senior officers and in the biggest office, the *fromage grande* himself, the Big Kahuna, Mister Christmas; the "Claus." Immediately below, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor, is the legal department. Any large business requires teams of legal experts.<sup>2</sup> Various administrative departments occupy other floors; human/elf resources, accounting, research and development, public relations and air traffic control.

The lobby is devoted to a Christmas museum, unlike any other in the world. There are treasures of Christmases from hundreds of cultures. One room is dedicated to Christmases around the world; there are the little wooden shoes, which Dutch children leave by the fireside to be filled with fruit and candy, another cabinet houses a little wooden golem, which Swiss families leave on their mantle all year round to keep watch on their children. A third houses the long stone axe the Tabori tribesmen use to slay the wild boar that makes for their annual Christmas feast.

In this museum, one sees that Christmas transcends lands and creeds. Since the dawn of time, people have held a feast in the middle of winter when the nights are longest and spring is still months off. The Norsemen called it the 'Yule-Feast'; the Romans dubbed it 'Saturnalia'. In each festival, the people feasted and prayed for the return of the Sun God, to once again warm the land and make it fertile.

Early popes tried to abolish these festivals, with all of their debauchery, but they were far too strongly entrenched in popular favour to be undone. Eventually, the Christians adopted the midwinter festival as their own, declaring it the celebration of the birth of Christ. And today, as in the earliest darkest nights, Christmas is a day of feasting and sharing, much like the original celebration from ancient times.

The east wall of the Christmas museum displays a memento of these most early midwinter feasts, long before it became known as 'Christmas'. It is a first century painting by an unknown Roman artist depicting the 'Feast of Fools'. It is a lively work, displaying a celebration of men and women dancing in a large high

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<sup>2</sup> In this case, the lawyers justified their continued employment by negotiating a fully guaranteed long-term multi-million dollar endorsement contract for Santa Claus with the *Coca Cola Company*.

ceilinged room. Some of the men are wearing animal heads; others are turning somersaults or playing horns. It is a joyous scene. Most intriguing however is a small background detail; the unknown artist rendered a bearded man in a red cloak with a bag slung over his shoulder, apparently surprised at having stumbled into the feast. It is believed to be the first drawing of Santa Claus.

The painting at the North Pole is only a fine copy; the original hangs in a wing of the Louvre in Paris, among such other masterpieces as the *Mona Lisa* and the *Venus de Milo*.

Though rarely seen, these aspects of the North Pole are all matters of public record. Less is recorded, or even known, of what lies beneath the Santa Claus Tower. There is a basement of course, mostly used for storage of old sleighs and out of style video games. Beneath that is a sub-basement, where the boilers that heat the entire compound churn away. Next to them is a state of the art air-conditioning system, which is, unfortunately, rarely used.

Lower still, in the sixth sub-basement, accessible only by a single security elevator is the headquarters of YID, or 'Yuletide Intelligence Department'. To enter the security elevator, one must pass a battery of identification tests. First, one must insert a security card, then sing a chorus of *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*. If the card is valid, and the voice patterns recognized, then the entrant must enter a classified security code on the elevator keypad. Only then will the elevator descend to the deepest floor and into YID.

YID is where all information is gathered and collated. Santa Claus has agents combing the world, identifying which children have been nice and which have been naughty. A staff of 50 highly trained elf spies operate under the direction of a crusty old elf known only by the code name 'Goomp'. Each YID elf is given a number and leaves all trace of his former identity behind on joining YID.

It takes years to become a member of YID. Years of tutelage in espionage techniques, counter-espionage and counter-counter-espionage. Candidates study the intricacies of interrogation, detection and disguise. On admission to YID, each agent is outfitted with a state of the art technical equipment distributed by a peculiar senior agent named Stu. Most dramatically, each YID agent has a cyanide capsule inserted into a molar, so that the agent can commit suicide before the nature of his or her mission can be uncovered.

**You are probably wondering if this story is ever going to go anywhere or if our friends Iggy, Yugo and Sam are ever going to appear. Bear with me. I am getting to them. Promise.**

On this day, the agents of YID are sequestered in an auditorium located behind an artificial bookcase in the YID library. They are told a dramatic piece of news: the ancient painting of the *Feast of Fools* has been stolen from the Louvre. A professional job, well financed and superbly executed.

Agent 66 explained to the assembly that the painting had been traced through the black market to the collection of the reclusive French billionaire, Montague Gaul. For tax reasons, Montague Gaul lived on a private Island in the Caribbean Sea. His personal living quarters were beneath the island and guarded by a battery of elite security guards. Gaul was reputed to own a collection of prized art works stolen from many of the finest galleries in the world. Original Rembrandts, Van Goghs, Picassos and even a doodle by Mozart hung on the walls of his private gallery.

It was said of Gaul that he was extremely paranoid and had converted his island into a form of military bunker. He was rarely seen on the surface of the island, preferring the cool comforts of his underground complex.

When word of the painting's theft reached YID, a strike force of six top agents, led by Agent 66, traveled to the island and tested its security and defences. Though they were able to map a good deal of it, Agent 66 sadly reported that Gaul's island fortress and private gallery was impregnable. The gallery was in the centre of the underground complex behind titanium walls over a metre thick. Heat and pressure sensors to detect an unwanted entry guarded the passage to the gallery, and the gallery itself. Invisible laser beams criss-crossed the hall and over a dozen security cameras monitored every possible approach.

The agents of YID debated Agent 66's report for several hours, but the result was inevitable. Despite the importance of the *Feast of Fools* to Christmas, it was irretrievable and YID closed its file on the case.

## II

The operations of YID are supposed to be conducted in absolute secrecy. Yet, the main topic of discussion that evening in the sixth floor cafeteria was the refusal of YID to attempt to recover the stolen masterpiece.

"And these guys call themselves intelligence ..." muttered Sam over a cup of hot chocolate. "They just like to spy on kids, you know, making lists and checking them twice. But when it comes to something important, they just shrug their shoulders like a bunch of useless bureaucrats." He snorted again and then scooped a large spoonful of double fudge truffle ice cream into his mouth.

Iggy had listened to this harangue for the better part of 20 minutes and found himself in the unusual position of actually agreeing with Sam. After all, this painting

was a part of the history of Christmas and should be enjoyed by the world and not just some greedy paranoid tax evader with the resources to steal and hide away the painting from every one. YID had failed them all by not even trying to retrieve the painting.

Sam continued his demagoguery, “a YID agent is just a busybody who likes to travel and dine out on his expense account. But whenever things get tough, he’s the first guy to scurry back to his easy chair by the fire.”

Yugo had not really paid much attention to this diatribe. Just for fun, he thought that he would bait his old friend. “Well, what would you do?” he asked Sam.

Sam slurped down some more ice cream. “I’d go for it!” he proclaimed.

“What about security?” asked Yugo.

Sam was always brave with a big bowl of ice cream in front of him. “I’d be careful,” he said. “Stay low, move quickly. They’d never even know I was there. I’d be in and with the painting before lunch.”

Yugo decided to egg Sam on some more. “YID has a complete dossier on the defences and security systems protecting the painting. It’s classified of course.”

Sam scarfed down the last of his ice cream. “If I had that file, I’d be on my way tomorrow.”

Yugo smiled, “I think I can get it for you.”

Sam blanched. He knew that he could talk tough when no one really expected him to do anything. But if Yugo got it into his head to make a real attempt on the painting, he had a horrible stomach shrinking feeling that he would soon be on his way to Montague Gaul’s Caribbean island retreat in the back seat of an airborne-fission-powered-high-speed-submersible snowmobile. The thought of climbing into that contraption was giving him a cramp.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Sam back-pedalled, “security at YID is pretty tight.”

“We’ll be careful,” said Yugo. “We’ll stay low. Move quickly ...”

Sam’s heart sank as he heard his own words parroted back at him. He was stuck in his own sticky glue and he knew it.

Yugo turned to Iggy. “Are you in, too?”

Iggy finished his hot chocolate and replied, “sure, why not? It sounds like fun.”

Sam scowled and ordered another ice cream. He was going to need to maintain his strength for this.

## III

Later that evening, Iggy, Yugo and Sam stood in the basement of the Santa Claus Tower beside the doors of the security elevator that descended to the 6<sup>th</sup> sub-basement headquarters of YID. Iggy pressed the call button, but nothing happened.

Sam pointed to the slot above the call button. "It won't come down unless you have a security card. I guess we might as well go back." He turned and started to walk towards the stairs.

"Hey, not so fast," said Yugo. He reached into his pocket and drew out a shiny silver card. He slid it into the slot and pressed the call button. The elevator doors parted silently. Yugo stepped inside.

He poked his head out. "Well, are you coming?" he asked.

The two other elves stepped inside. "Where did you get that card?" asked Iggy incredulously.

Yugo shrugged. "People are forever leaving things behind in the locker room at the health club. I have a couple of dozen of these in my room." The elevator doors slid closed.

Sam pressed a button labelled '-6'. Nothing happened. He pressed it again and an electronic voice spoke. "Please speak clearly," it said.

"It's a voice identification system," whispered Yugo. "It will only recognize an authorized YID agent. You have to sing *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*."

Sam cleared his throat.

"No, not you," said Yugo. "It won't recognize your voice."

Sam looked hurt as Yugo pulled a small tape recorder from his fanny pack. He flicked it on and a choir sang in dolorous tones:

*"God rest ye merry gentlemen,  
Let nothing you dismay ..."*

As the chorus finished, the '-6' button illuminated and the elevator started to descend.

"What was that?" asked Iggy.

"It's a recording of the YID choir I made at the Christmas pageant last year. The elevator recognized all of their voices!" replied Yugo.

The elevator stopped, but the doors remained shut. The electronic voice chirped, "Please enter the security code." A plastic panel slid aside and revealed a 10-digit keyboard. A small digital counter began counting down from 30. Iggy realized that if they did not enter the correct code in the next half-minute, it would trigger an alarm and their immediate arrest.

For the first time Yugo looked a little nervous. The counter reached 10, and then began counting down in tenths of a second.

"Don't you know the combination?" muttered Sam.

"No, of course not," said Yugo.

They watched the counter approach zero. Suddenly Yugo reached out and punched in four numbers. The counter stopped at '00:03'. The elevator doors opened and the electronic voice said "Thank you. Please come again."

The elves stepped out. "I thought you didn't know the code," said Sam.

"I didn't," said Yugo. "I just guessed."

"Good guess," said Iggy. "What was it?"

"1-2-2-5 ... December 25<sup>th</sup>," replied Yugo. "It's the only combination anyone around here seems to use."

Iggy laughed and followed Yugo and Sam down a grey metal corridor. They stopped before a door labelled 'File Room'. Yugo opened the door slowly and they stepped inside.

The room was very dark. At least it was until Yugo turned on the light. It was a large room with rows of green metal filing cabinets lining each of the walls.

Sam whispered softly, "where do we begin?"



Yugo rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Then he proceeded to the filing cabinet labelled 'Sexy - Topless Models'. Sam gasped as Yugo reached inside and removed a file with the word 'Stolen Painting' written on it in simple black letters. He took the file to the large polished oak table in the centre of the room and spread out its contents.

"This is what we need," said Yugo, satisfied. "We've got photographs, schematics, security schedules and the likely location of the painting." He packed

the documents into the folder and slid it under his arm. He looked at his watch. "Hurry, *Monday Night Football* is almost over. In a few minutes, this place will be swarming with agents. Let's move!"

The three elves scrambled back to the security elevator. Yugo slid his security card into the slot and pressed the call button.

"The lights!" shouted Sam, remembering they had left the lights on in the file room. He ran back to turn them out. He arrived without incident and paused for a moment to stare at the words 'Sexy - Topless Models' on the little file card located at the top of the file cabinet. Finally he shook his head, flipped off the switch and left the room. As soon as the door shut behind him, an alarm went off.

Sam scrambled back to his friends and slid into the elevator just as the doors slammed together. He shuddered and gasped for air. A siren wailed in the elevator and a red light flashed on and off as Yugo replayed his tape of Christmas carols. The elevator started to rise, but then stopped unexpectedly on sub-basement 4.

The elevator doors slid open to an unassuming curly haired elf. He was dressed in red and green in the manner of elves. There was nothing remarkable about him except for how utterly unremarkable he was. That, and a badge with the number '42' embroidered on his chest and the grey, semi-automatic laser pistol in his left hand.

He motioned for Iggy, Yugo and Sam to leave the elevator. He led them to a small room with pastel green walls and a card table in the centre. He directed them to sit in the metal fold up chairs around the table.

"All right, what's going on?" asked Agent 42. "You guys know these floors are off limits to you toy making elves."

Iggy, Yugo and Sam had always taken considerable pride in their profession and did not at all care for the insulting way they were described as merely 'toy making elves'. Sam could not contain himself and burst out, "hey, at least we don't run and hide at the first sign of trouble."

"What do you mean," asked 42, looking at the barrel of his laser pistol.

"We heard all about you YID-iots," Sam grinned at the cleverness of his pun, "you YID-iots are too chicken to go and get that painting from Gaul's island."

Iggy piped in, "so we are going to do it for you. That's why we need this file."

Agent 42 stared at each of the elves. "So, you think you have what it takes to be a secret Christmas agent, do you?"

"As a matter of fact, we do," retorted Yugo.

“All right,” said 42, setting his laser pistol on the table. “If you think that you can get the painting which YID (here he pronounced each letter separately) has deemed irretrievable, then I am going to let you try it.”

Iggy, Yugo and Sam stared back in astonishment.

“There’s only one condition,” said 42. “I’m going with you.”

“What?” asked Sam.

Agent 42 stood and walked to the corner of the room. “I agree with you completely. YID (again, he spoke each letter slowly and separately) should have gone after the painting. Unfortunately, too many of our agents won’t volunteer for a risky mission unless there are pretty girls involved. A lot of spies are like that these days.”

“But you three seem to have more courage than most of the Agents in YID. After all, you got through our security system and almost got out again. So, the four of us will go after the painting.”

He added to Yugo, “besides, I’ve always wanted to go for a ride in that snowmobile of yours.”

#### IV

The four elves stayed up most of the night in Iggy’s room with the contents of the Stolen Paintings file scattered about the floor. Agent 42 and Yugo flipped through the papers, exchanged various ideas and made notes. It was late morning when 42 rose and drew a chalk diagram on the wall.

“Hey!” said Iggy. “I could get some demerits for that.”

“It will wash,” said 42. He quickly sketched out a series of rooms and hallways. “The island is ringed by a coral reef which is infested with sharks and piranhas. High concrete walls topped with barbed wire surround the beaches. There are anti-aircraft guns and ground to air missiles, so we cannot approach from the air.

“Once on the island, we will have to descend into the underground living quarters.” 42 used Iggy’s hockey stick as a pointer while he explained his diagram. “If we can make it to the master bedroom, then we just walk down this hallway to the gallery itself. The hall is equipped with motion detectors that trigger laser beams. The floor of the gallery has pressure sensors that initiate an unknown hazard. The painting hangs here,” he gestured firmly with the butt end of the hockey stick, smudging his diagram. “The picture hook is weight sensitive, so that if the painting is removed, an alarm will immediately ring. A security camera is trained on the painting at all times.”

Iggy and Sam sighed heavily. There was no way they could get in and out with the painting in one piece.

“Yugo and I believe that we can get in and out with the painting in one piece,” said Agent 42. “It will involve precise timing. We cannot expect to remain in the gallery for more than two or three minutes undetected.”

“But how can we remove the painting without sounding the alarm?” asked Iggy.

“We are not going to take the painting,” said Yugo. “We are going to replace it.”

“With what?” asked Sam. “One of Iggy’s paint-by-number sets of dogs playing cards?” He gestured at three paintings that hung on the wall behind him. Iggy’s face turned pink.

“No,” said 42, wincing as he took in Iggy’s artwork. “We will be using an excellent copy. Now, get some rest. We will be leaving in six hours.”

Iggy was asleep the moment his head hit the pillow. He wondered as he faded through that grey misty border between wakefulness and sleep where they could get an ‘excellent copy’ of the *Feast of Fools*.

He was totally unaware that as he slept, Agent 42 was walking into the museum in the lobby of the Santa Claus Tower. He showed his YID identification to the security guard. The guard led him to a display case and stood by unmoving as Agent 42 pulled down the copy of the *Feast of Fools* from Santa Claus’ art collection.

He nodded politely to the guard as he placed the painting under his arm and walked out of the museum.

## V

Iggy nudged Sam awake. “We’re almost there,” he said. Sam stirred and opened his eyes. They had been flying in the back seat of Yugo’s remarkable snowmobile for most of the day. They were just north of Gaul’s Island, 300km south of the Florida coast. The sun had set and a sea of stars winked above the inky black ocean.

Sam stretched. “Have you guys figured out a way around the anti-aircraft guns?”

“Yes,” said Yugo. Agent 42 sat beside him, studying a large map of the Caribbean Sea. “We think an aerial approach is much too dangerous, and coming in by boat isn’t much better. However,” he said, moving his right hand onto the stick shift, “they’ll never expect us to come at them underwater.”

He jammed the stick shift into second gear and immediately stalled the snowmobile. It fell into the sea and sank like a brick.

Sam screamed. He paused, caught his breath, and screamed again.

“Quiet down, I’m trying to concentrate,” said Yugo. He pulled a lever and shifted the fuel to air engines into water propulsion mode. The snowmobile stopped sinking and bobbed unevenly. Yugo turned a dial and flipped a toggle switch. The snowmobile stabilized and Yugo guided it towards the island. Two 2,000-watt headlamps flashed on and the elves saw a school of startled tropical fish dart away from them.

The ocean was shallow here and they could see the plants on the seabed sway slowly back and forth in the current. Even the fish bobbed from side to side, until they swam away from the approaching snowmobile.

Iggy marvelled at the variety of colours. The fish were brilliant blues and yellows; others were streaked in the deepest black. The coral branches were a flaming yellow and Yugo manoeuvred carefully through them. There was no sign of anything man made. The ocean sand looked deep and clean.

The island rose up from the sandy ocean bottom. Yugo guided the snowmobile around the rocky face of the island until he found a large metal pipe jutting out of the rock and into the sea.

“The water demands for an operation this size are tremendous,” explained Agent 42. “This pipe will lead us right past the security systems.” Agent 42 was right. The pipe easily accommodated the snowmobile and led them into the complex. They wound about for a time and eventually stopped in a giant holding tank. Yugo let the snowmobile rise to the surface of the water. It bobbed over to the side of the tank and stopped.

The passenger door opened upwards and Agent 42 stuck out his head. There was no one around. The water works employees had obviously left for the night. 42 climbed out of the tank, followed by Yugo and Sam. Iggy passed out the copy of the *Feast of Fools* and a black velvet bag filled with equipment and gadgets supplied by Yugo and Agent 42. Then he climbed out himself.

Yugo picked up the sack. Agent 42 slung the fake painting onto his back. Each of the elves was dressed head to toe in black. They wore matching black toques and their faces were dirtied with shoe polish.

They scampered to the wall and slid along it to the door. Agent 42 looked out, then ducked his head back inside.

“The halls are filled with security guards,” he hissed. “We need another way.”

Yugo reached into the bag and pulled out the schematic diagram of the complex. Then he looked to the wall behind them. There was a grate there. Yugo pointed to it. "This leads into the air conditioning system".

Agent 42 pulled a crowbar from the bag and pried off the grate. "After you," he said.

Behind the grate was a narrow metal passageway. Yugo and Iggy climbed in. Sam hesitated. The tunnel was small, but after all he was an elf. He shrugged and scrambled in after them. Agent 42 followed, pulling the grate into place behind them.

The air in the tunnel was cold and blew hard around them. Of course, cold drafty places were quite comfortable for four elves who spent every January at the North Pole.

Yugo led the way, squirming through the narrow metal tunnel on his hands and knees. He struggled to unfold his schematic and studied it by the light of a small YID issue flashlight he pulled out of the velvet bag. He called over his shoulder to Iggy. "We're under the kitchen right now. If we go on for another 20 metres or so, we will come to the master bedroom. We can't get all the way to the gallery from here, it has a separate ventilation system, but the master bedroom is pretty close." He folded up the map and crawled ahead.

Iggy followed, with Sam and Agent 42 creeping blindly behind. Yugo turned left into an even narrower passage. 42 struggled into it with the phoney painting. The air was cooler here and in a moment Yugo stopped beside another grate.

Dim light filled the tunnel. The reading lamp was on, but there was no one in the room. Suddenly they heard the sound of a shower start running in what appeared to be an adjacent bathroom.

"He just stepped into the shower," said Yugo, "we only have a few minutes."

"I knew a girl once who could stay in the shower for three quarters of an hour" commented Iggy.

"We can't count on that," said 42. "Most people don't like to waste that much water; let's go".

Yugo carefully opened the grate and they crawled into the room. They darted quietly to the door and looked out.

There was a long sterile grey hall. Iggy stepped forward but Agent 42 held his arm. 42 reached into his pocket and withdrew a nickel. He tossed it in a high arc into the hall. There was a sharp hissing crackle as a blindingly bright beam of red light struck the nickel at the height of its arc. It fell to the floor with a thick splash. It had melted into slag.

“Motion detectors. Very sensitive,” said 42.

“And high intensity lasers. Very hot.” Said Yugo.

“We are going to need some protection,” said Agent 42. He looked around the room. He rose and climbed onto the bed. He reached up and removed a large mirror in a heavy wooden frame. He struggled with it back to the doorway.

“Figures a guy this rich would have lots of mirrors around,” said Agent 42.

“What good is a mirror?” asked Sam.

Agent 42 explained, “lasers are nothing more than tightly focussed beams of light. Like any other kind of light, they reflect off shiny objects, like mirrors. So long as we stand behind this mirror, it will reflect the laser beams harmlessly away.”

Sam gulped, then joined the other three behind the mirror. So long as they huddled together, they could all fit behind the big frame.

They shuffled slowly into the hall. Immediately there was a sharp crack and a flash of light. Iggy could see the laser beam was deflected downward where it gouged a deep hole into the floor.

They continued down the hall. The air crackled with the frequent laser flashes. The air smelled of ozone. Suddenly the corner of the mirror’s frame blew apart into black smouldering splinters. The elves shuffled ahead quickly. After what seemed like hours they stepped into the doorway at the end of the hall. They had made it into the gallery.

It was an impressive room. It was the size of a gymnasium. The floor was like a giant chessboard, with alternating tiles of black and white. The walls were covered with paintings of every kind and description. Even Iggy, who knew very little about art, recognized the work of many of the old masters. The swirling skies of Van Gogh, the detail of Da Vinci and the thick dark tones of Rembrandt. There was a colourful Picasso alongside a bold blue figure of Matisse. A massive marble statue stood in the centre of the gallery. It was unmistakable: Michelangelo’s *David*. It was an eclectic collection, and Iggy knew for a certainty that each of the paintings lining the walls of the gallery was an original. The collection was priceless.

Then he saw it. On the wall to his right hung the ancient masterpiece. The *Feast of Fools*. The elves were standing on a black tile inside the doorway. On each side of them stood gleaming suits of armour. The armour of long dead knights silently stood guard over the entrance to the gallery.

Sam lowered the big mirror and set it down on the black tile in front of one of the suits of armour. The tile immediately swung open and the mirror fell through the trap door. After an impossibly long moment they heard its muffled crash as it shattered on a stone floor far below. The black tile swung back into place.

“The room is booby-trapped!” shouted Iggy.

“Quiet,” hissed Agent 42. “There must be a way through.” He fished in his pocket and pulled out another nickel. He tossed it onto the white tile in front of them. No sooner did the nickel strike the tile than it swung downward, dropping the nickel into the darkness below. Agent 42 tossed another nickel onto the two black tiles diagonal to them, with the same result. He threw another onto the black tile two rows in front of them. Again, a trap door sprang open and the coin disappeared.

Then he threw one onto the white tile two rows ahead and to the left. This time the nickel bounced, then spun to a stop. “That’s encouraging,” said Agent 42. “I was beginning to run out of change.”

He leapt out onto the white tile. The others cringed, fearing the worst, but it held. Iggy, Yugo and Sam followed his lead. Soon they stood close together, taking care to stay within the borders of the white tile.

Agent 42 picked up the nickel and tossed it out onto the next row, looking for another safe square. He triggered three more trap doors before he found a safe tile with his last nickel. It was two squares to the right and up one.

Yugo looked back at the two suits of armour at the doorway, standing silently like two knights on the edge of a giant chessboard. He let out a giggle. “I’ve got it!” With that, he jumped out onto the square where Agent 42’s nickel lay. He picked it up, placed it in his pocket and jumped onto another square, two squares up and one to the right.

The others jumped after him, following quickly as he hip hopped across the gallery until he stood on the square directly before the *Feast of Fools*. He explained as they joined him, “the secret is to move like a knight on a chessboard. Two up and one across, or two across and one up. The two knights at the doorway were a dead giveaway.

Agent 42 pulled the fake painting off of his back. They had reached their goal. They only had to make the switch and return the way they had come.

None of them noticed that in a large bathroom beside the master bedroom, a bony hand had just turned off the water.

In the gallery, the elves crouched under the genuine painting. Agent 42 reminded them that there was a camera trained on the painting itself. They would have to make the switch on camera!

There was also the weight detector. The hook holding the painting was sensitive to weight. If the painting were removed, it would sound the alarm. Agent 42 reviewed the plan with them one final time. Then he counted down from three to one. When he reached one, the elves sprang into action.

First, Yugo activated an ultrasonic device, which generated a band of interference that would disrupt the security camera for about five seconds. During that time, anyone monitoring the camera would only see snow. So long as the switch was completed quickly, the guard would attribute the interference to some atmospheric disruption or similar transmission problem.

As soon as Yugo pressed the button, Iggy and Agent 42 strung a thin wire across the picture hook and held it down from either end. Sam carefully lifted the painting as Iggy and Agent 42 pulled on the wire, maintaining pressure on the picture hook. The weight detector sensed that the picture remained in place and the alarm did not sound. Sam gently hung the copy on the hook as Iggy and Agent 42 released their grip on the wire.

Five seconds had passed. The security camera re-activated, its electric eye focused now on the replacement canvas. Agent 42 slung the genuine painting onto his back and the elves hopped back and forth across the gallery floor. They reached the door and looked down the long hall that led back to the master bedroom.

They had lost the mirror and needed some other way to avoid the laser cannons. Sam suggested that they just run for it, but Yugo knew they would be flash fried before they got halfway down the hall. He stared again at the gleaming suits of armour that guarded the gallery entrance.

A minute later, they were climbing into the suits of armour, two elves to a suit. Fortunately, the armour was large and the elves were small. They stepped awkwardly into the hall in the heavy metal armour. The laser beams crackled at them, but were reflected off of the shiny metal and out of harm's way.

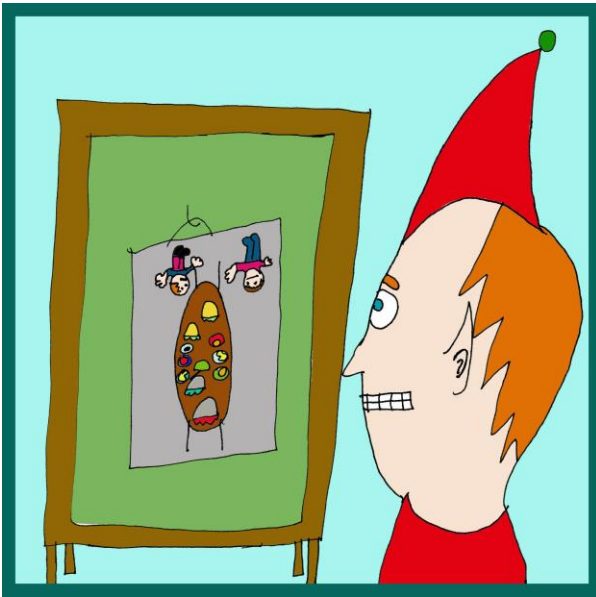
They stepped slowly down the hall and into the master bedroom. Iggy pulled the heavy helmet off of his head and wiped a sweaty lock of hair out of his eyes. He blinked, and then looked straight into the cold dark eyes of Montague Gaul and about two dozen heavily armed security guards.

Montague Gaul was dressed in a long blue hospital gown, buttoned to his chin. He was a thin spectre of a man, his skin as white as the paper this story is written on. His thin grey hair was slicked back against his pale skull. His cheeks were sunken beside his long thin nose. He spoke in a sibilant whisper, his breath smelt like an open grave. "I believe you have something that belongs to me," he hissed. He reached a white skeletal arm towards the *Feast of Fools*.

He pulled the painting from Agent 42's hand. He held up the masterpiece and laughed with a maniacal giggle.

The security guards pulled the elves from the armour. Sam kicked and struggled against the irresistible grip of his captors. "You've got a lot of gall, Gaul," he shouted.

“Oh do I,” said Montague Gaul. “That’s pretty tough talk for a very little man who is in a great deal of trouble.”



“Is that right, Monty,” shouted Sam. The guards pulled him into the hall.

“That’s right,” breathed Gaul. He gestured towards a bank of television monitors on one of the bedroom walls. “You might have got away with it. If only you had not hung your pitiful copy correctly.”

Sam stared at one of the television screens. Sure enough, the fake painting hung there in place of the stolen original. But it was upside down. “Ack!” grunted Sam, striking his forehead with the palm of his hand.

## VI

Iggy tried to brush the sand fly from his cheek, but the rope around his wrist held his arm fast. He lay tied to 4 wooden stakes on the beach of Gaul’s Island. The sun was beginning to rise, and Iggy could see the shadow of the snowmobile creep slowly across the sand towards him.

The snowmobile hung directly above him, suspended by a thick rope. The rope looped over a heavy tree branch and was itself tied to a sturdy metal ring that was imbedded in a concrete block. Several crabs climbed about the ring, snipping at the threads of the rope with their pinchers.

Iggy leaned over to Yugo, who was staked to the ground beside him.

“How much does your snowmobile weigh?” he asked.

“A little less than a Honda Accord,” answered Yugo. “About two tonnes.”

Iggy winced. It was only a matter of time before the crabs weakened the rope enough for it to break. When it did, the snowmobile would fall onto them, smashing them all and itself into oblivion.

It was starting to get hot, and Iggy regretted that he was still wearing his black turtleneck and toque.

A thin white figure ambled slowly towards them, with a large beach towel wrapped around his shoulders. It was Montague Gaul, with a picture frame under his arm. He stopped beside a palm tree and hung the painting on a twisted nail that had been hammered there a long time before.

Gaul leaned over the four elves and leered at them. "I thought I would let you have one last look at the painting you worked so hard to find. A crude work. Hardly worth your lives. Tell me, little men, why did you kill yourselves by coming to take my property?"

Sam bellowed at him; "this painting is a piece of our history, a piece of Christmas. That's way bigger than any of us, even you Monty."

Gaul looked hurt, but said nothing. Sam continued. "This painting teaches us where we've come from and where we are going. It doesn't belong to you, it belongs to the world. It belongs to Christmas!"

"A noble speech, dwarf," sneered Gaul. "Perhaps you can tell the angels all about it when you arrive in the next world!"

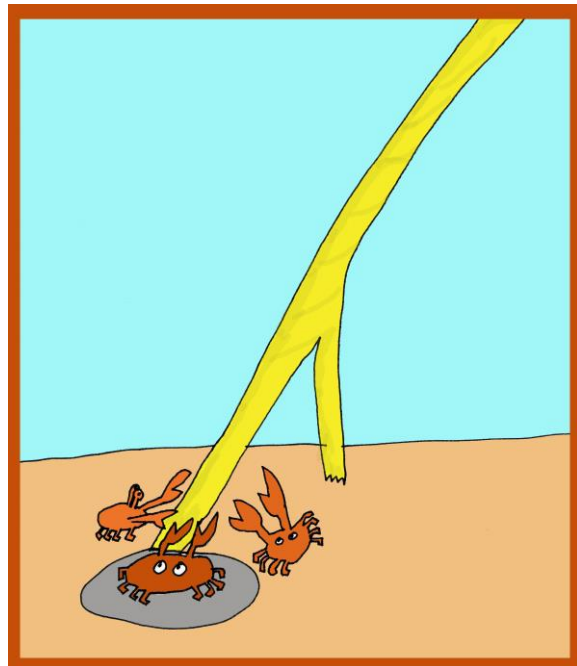
There was a popping sound as one of the strands of the rope broke. The snowmobile shuddered and dropped a few centimetres. The crabs kept on working on the other two strands of rope.

"Oh, it shan't be long now," giggled Montague Gaul. He pointed to the painting. "Take another look boys, take the memory of the painting to your grave!"

You know, Monty," said Sam, "you are really sick. Why don't you just shoot us or something? This whole death trap thing is really warped."

Agent 42 spoke up. "Oh its just typical evil genius stuff. Can't kill someone without an elaborate execution machine. Probably pulls legs off spiders for a hobby."

"Why thank you, little man," grinned Gaul, "it does have a certain maniacal style, doesn't it?" Gaul flipped his towel over a tree branch and walked towards the ocean. "Ta-ta for now," he said, "I'm already late for my morning swim."



A few minutes passed. The rope creaked and the snowmobile began to sway. The second strand of the rope broke and the snowmobile dropped a little further.

The remaining strand stretched and then broke, no longer able to support the weight of the snowmobile.

The snowmobile fell to the ground like an anvil in a Bugs Bunny cartoon. Yugo, who had remained silent throughout this entire time, suddenly shouted, "Stop!"

And the snowmobile did. It floated in the air at arms length above them, and Yugo's arms are not very long at all.

"Wha-" said Sam.

"I've made a few modifications," explained Yugo. "A voice recognition command chip." He barked out another series of commands and the snowmobile floated to the ground beside them. Then he instructed the snowmobile to emit a short burst from its laser cannons that severed the ropes that held them to the ground.

Iggy, Yugo, Sam, and Agent 42 stood up slowly, rubbing their wrists and ankles to restore the circulation. Sam walked over to where the painting hung, lifted it off of the old rusty hook and placed it carefully in the trunk of the snowmobile. The elves climbed inside and Yugo flipped on the ignition. The snowmobile purred quietly. Yugo slipped it into gear and drove to the beach.

Montague Gaul ran out of the ocean as gracefully as an ostrich and stood stunned beside the snowmobile. Agent 42, seated in the passenger seat lowered his window. He spoke to Montague Gaul in a sharp, clipped voice.

"Mister Gaul, I am Agent 42 of the Yuletide Intelligence Department. I have made my list, and reviewed it twice. It will be my report to headquarters that you have been a very naughty boy."

Montague Gaul, whose face was already as pale as a gallon of No. 3 eggshell, turned white.

"No, wait," he stammered, "I can explain..."

Yugo released the clutch slowly and the snowmobile crept forward. Agent 42 raised his window. Montague Gaul ran after them in his stiff gait. "It's all just a little breakdown in communication."

The elves could not hear him anymore. Yugo had initiated the flight sequence and the snowmobile rose quickly in to the blue morning sky. Gaul's Island faded into a small dot in the rear-view mirror, with Montague Gaul himself a very, very small dot indeed.

## VII

It was a week later. The *Feast of Fools* hung in its proper place in the Louvre. The copy had been returned to the North Pole by Montague Gaul, along with a lengthy letter from his lawyer explaining that Mr. Gaul's actions, though they might be open to an interpretation substantially equivalent to 'naughtiness' could notwithstanding said interpretation be explained, and invited Mr. S. Claus or his designee to a meeting. The letter was filed in a large aluminum recycling box in the YIO file room.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam were just finishing lunch when they were approached by Agent 42 and a sombre looking older elf who identified himself as "Goomp, Director of YID."

He explained that YID was always on the lookout for new agents and he felt that based on their recent activities, Iggy, Yugo, and Sam had the makings of first rate agents.

"What?" said Sam, "join Intelligence? I am much too smart for that!"

Goomp explained some of the perks, the girls, the cars, the seats at the best restaurants, but Sam just talked over him. "I've got the most important job at the North Pole. I make toys. I like the food here. And if I ever need a ride, I can always call my friend Yugo."

Yugo blushed. Agent 42 and Goomp could see it was a lost cause, thanked the three of them anyway and took their leave.

"But Sam," said Iggy, "what about the girls?"

"Ack!" said Sam, striking his forehead with the heel of his hand.

