

LUCRETIA ALOPEESHA TAKES A VACATION

-OR-

WHERE IN THE WORLD IS LUCRETIA ALOPEESHA?

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NEW PICTURES BY DANIELLE

DECEMBER 10

Lucretia Alopeesha hated Christmastime. To be clear, it was not that she hated Christmas. It was just that her job as Manager-in-Chief at the North Pole did not leave her with much time to enjoy the trappings of Christmas. By the time December 25 rolled around each year she was far too busy for the wrapping paper and tinsel, the holly and mistletoe and virtually anything that was red or green.

As Manager-in-Chief, North Pole Operations, Lucretia was responsible for the administration of Santa Claus' entire toy manufacture and distribution divisions. In other words, she ran the show. And running the show meant a lot of early mornings and late nights come December. Indeed, by December 1st, Lucretia was responsible for closing almost every night.

It was not always this way. In earlier years, Lucretia had loved the Christmas season. The first snowfall always got her thinking of Christmas morning and the smell of pine needles at any time of year set her heart aglow with anticipation of wrapping and unwrapping Christmas parcels.

It was her love of Christmas that brought her to the North Pole in the first place. She arrived one spring and started work the next day as a payroll clerk in the accounting department. While it was not the type of job she was looking for, it was important work. There were several thousand elves on the payroll and it was an enormous undertaking to see they received their pay cheques every second Thursday. If payday was ever missed there would be utter chaos.

Within six months Lucretia was heading the payroll department and the next year she was the Accounting Manager. She continued to rise quickly in the operation as a result of her hard work and dedication to her employer. Only five years after her arrival she was Manager-in-Chief; North Pole Operations; second in command only to Mr. Claus himself.

Over the past several years, Lucretia had overseen a dramatic shift to automation and computerization. Computers ran most every aspect of the administration, and Lucretia ran the computers. Payrolls, supplies, receivables, shipping were all handled by computer; as was the most important database of all – the naughty/nice list.

All of this information was accessible to Lucretia, and through her, to Santa Claus. Lucretia kept a new terminal in her corner office on the 24th floor of the Santa Claus Tower. She spent almost every waking hour of every day at that terminal, monitoring all of the many facets of the business. And by December there was always a lot of work to be done.



So it was a chilly evening in late December that Lucretia found herself staring at her monitor and arranging for the delivery of another 10,000 metres of HO scale train track to be delivered the following week. Lucretia's mind was wandering to Christmases long past when she had the time to experience all the sights and sensations of Christmas.

She pushed her mouse aimlessly across her desk and scrolled through her menu. Then she decided to do it. To take a vacation. After all, she had not had one for 15 years. She could do it now too – everything could be run by the computer. She just had to program it to do her job for the next couple of weeks and she would be on her way. For the first time in many a December night, Lucretia smiled as she tapped away at her keyboard.

DECEMBER 11

Iggy, Yugo and Sam stepped off of the elevator and onto the 24th floor of the Santa Claus Tower with some trepidation. They had been summoned to Santa's office just before breakfast; although Sam wanted to finish his eggs first, the others convinced him not to keep Mr. Claus waiting.

A summons to the Chief's office was always cause for some concern. Santa was known for making some pretty onerous demands on elves called into his office, particularly close to Christmastime. A few years earlier he had called Yugo into his office and outlined his vision for a game, which would be played on a television set. He needed 2,000 units to be delivered in 30 days. Yugo was forced to work 20 hours a day for three weeks. However, once he had invented his video game, Santa was able to license it to the Sega Corporation. The royalties were a major component of the financing needed to keep the entire operation going.



Yugo was scared to death of what Santa might have in mind this time with only two weeks to go until Christmas. "I'm getting too old for this," he muttered as they walked up and knocked on the big double oak doors with the brass plate that said:

<p style="text-align: center;">S. Claus Chief Executive Officer</p>
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A big voice boomed out, “come in boys, come in”.

Iggy jumped, and then stepped into the office, followed by Yugo and Sam.

“I have an important job for you lads,” said Santa, gesturing for the elves to sit in the half dozen wing back chairs drawn up to the fireplace on the south wall.¹

Santa poured himself a large grapefruit juice and joined the elves by the fire.

“You may have heard that our Manager-in-Chief, Miss Alopeesha has left on a well deserved vacation.”

Sam coughed his grapefruit juice onto his red and green tunic “Lucy is on vacation? Lucy never takes a vacation!”

Santa Claus glared at Sam. Lucretia hated being called ‘Lucy’. She insisted on being called Miss Alopeesha. Not even Santa called her Lucretia.

“I mean, Miss Alopeesha never takes a vacation,” mumbled Sam.

Santa nodded and continued. “Miss Alopeesha advised me this morning she would be taking her 34 weeks accrued vacation time commencing immediately. Apparently, she is off to the South Seas even as we speak. I let her take the one horse open sleigh.” This was a much smaller sleigh than the big eight reindeer model Santa used every Christmas Eve. Even though it was known as a ‘one horse’ sleigh, it had to be pulled by a reindeer if one wanted to fly it anywhere.

“But who is going to run everything for the next 34 weeks?” asked Iggy. “For crying out loud, it’s almost Christmas!”

¹ Of course, since the Tower is built precisely on the North Pole, every wall one looked at was southward. This is not to say every wall in the office had a fireplace; only the south one.

“That’s where you boys come into the picture,” said Santa Claus. “As three of my best and most trusted elves, I’ve decided to put you in charge until Miss Alopeesha returns. You’ll have complete use of her office and complete responsibility for everything.

“Now”, he said, rising from his chair, “there is a lot of work to be done, so you had better get to it.”

Santa Claus walked over to his enormous mahogany desk and slid open the top drawer. “Of course, the job comes with certain perquisites”. He withdrew a large gold key from the drawer and tossed it to Iggy.

“That’s the key to the Executive Washroom. If you are going to be executives, you will need a proper place to go.”

Iggy slid the key into his tunic pocket as the three elves walked out of the office.

“And boys,” boomed Santa Claus as they reached the big double doors, “don’t screw up.”

* * *

“This is the life,” sighed Sam, as he sank to his chin in the twelve-jet Jacuzzi tub in the south wing² of the Executive Washroom. This was his third bath of the morning; he had spent most of the time between baths upon the bidet.

Yugo stepped down from the stool he had drawn up to the urinal and re-arranged his green felt trousers. “You know, Sam,” he said, “Iggy and I could use a hand. Do you think you could spare us a moment or two this afternoon?”

“I’ll try to fit you in,” Sam replied as he added a little more hot water to the bath.

² See footnote 1. As before, since the Executive Washroom is located exactly 24 stories above the North Pole, all six wings are known as ‘the south wing’. This would be the source of some confusion, except for the fact that polite society does not discuss the inner regions of a washroom; accordingly the problem has never arisen.

Yugo just sighed and returned to Miss Alopeesha's office.

Sam joined Yugo and Iggy there about half an hour later. He was wearing a thick velour bathrobe and was still towelling his unkempt brown hair. "What's up guys?" he said.

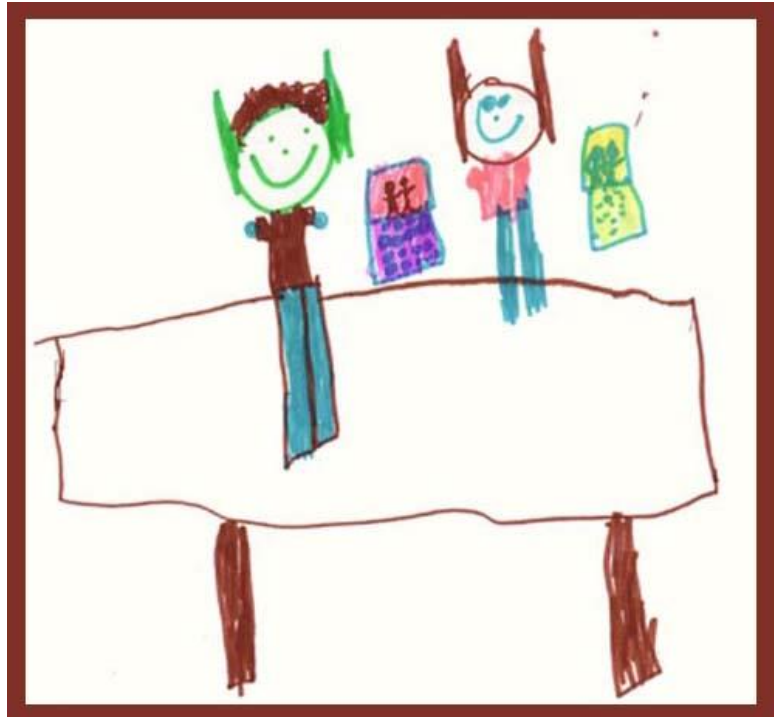
Iggy turned from the terminal and greeted Sam. "Grab a seat," he said, "you're in charge of payables. There are over 5,000 suppliers that have to be paid, not to mention payroll. You're in charge." He slid a stool over to Sam.

Sam frowned, hiked up the back of his bathrobe and sat down in front of the terminal. He slid his mouse across the desk and got to work.

DECEMBER 17

Things continued like this for the next several days. Iggy and Yugo worked long and hard at the computer and Sam spent most of the day in the bathtub, emerging whenever the water cooled down to attend to a few of the payables and reconcile some accounts.

When they weren't working on the computer, Iggy and Yugo were on the phone, dealing with suppliers, dealing with manufacturers and worst of all, dealing with the lawyers.



"How did Miss Alopeesha ever manage?" asked Yugo between phone calls.

"Who knows," said Iggy as he fed another few pages into the fax. He looked at his watch. "Time to get the mail," he said.

Iggy and Yugo went down to the mailroom together. There was always a lot of mail coming in this time of year, and not just from children. There were invoices, contracts, requests for promotional appearances – all of these had to be sorted and dealt with by the Manager-in-Chief.

“What’s this?” asked Yugo, pulling a colored postcard from the pile.

“It’s from Miss Alopeesha,” said Iggy. “Looks like she’s in Samoa!”

It certainly was. The postcard looked something like this:

Greetings to all from Samoa!
Having a great time - wish you were here.
Weather is hot. Tried surfing today; may
Go fishing tomorrow! All my best to everyone.

Sincerely,
Miss Alopeesha.

P.S. Don’t forget applesauce.

“How nice!” said Iggy.

“What do you suppose the applesauce business is about?” asked Yugo.

“She’s always eating that stuff,” replied Iggy. “Probably can’t find her brand in the tropics.”

“Do you suppose Sam is out of the bath yet?” asked Yugo, as he lifted one of the big mailbags over his shoulder.

“I doubt it, but I hope he gets out soon. It’s payday today and he’s in charge of payroll. Here, let me give you a hand with that.” Iggy reached over and grabbed a corner of the mailbag. They headed back upstairs carrying it between them.

They reached Lucretia's office to find Sam, freshly bathed and hard at work at his terminal.

"Say guys," he said to the two elves as they walked in, "what is the access code for the payroll file?"

Iggy and Yugo traded glances. "How should we know," they said in unison. "But you better figure it out; today's payday."

"Don't remind me," said Sam. "But I can't get into the payroll program – it's got a security code and it's not written down anywhere."

Iggy and Yugo started digging through the stacks of files, notes and little yellow stickies piled throughout the office, but there was no clue.

"Let's just guess," said Sam.

"But it could be anything!" said Iggy.

"No, people always choose something personal to them to use as passwords it makes them easy to remember." Said Yugo.

"Let's try her name," said Sam. He typed in "LUCRETIA".

"INCORRECT USER ID," flashed the screen, "PLEASE RE-ENTER".

"Try 'Miss Alopeesha,'" said Iggy, "that's how she signed the card."

Sam typed in 'MISS ALOPEESHA'.

Again the screen flashed 'INCORRECT USER ID PLEASE RE-ENTER'.

"How about this," said Sam, and he typed in 'LUCY'.

This time the screen flashed 'INCORRECT USER ID' and then it went black.

"The system has shut down!" shouted Iggy.

“It must be programmed to do that after 3 wrong entries,” said Yugo. “Miss Alopeesha has clearly programmed the system to keep unauthorized users out of the payroll files.”

“So how do we get back in?” asked Sam.

“I have no idea,” replied Yugo. “Only Miss Alopeesha knows for sure.”

“What about payroll?” asked Sam. “If we don’t issue the cheques on time—”.

He never finished the sentence because at that moment the 5:00 o’clock horn blew.

“Oh no – “ said Sam, clasp ing his head in his hands.

Oh no indeed. There had only been one occasion in the past where a payroll was missed at the North Pole when, due to a bank error, all 3000 elf paycheques bounced. The error was soon rectified, but it led the elves to form a union: United Toy Makers; UTM Local 1.

Soon afterwards, they signed a collective bargaining agreement with Santa Claus. It was a fair deal for all involved, but it contained a very strict term to prevent any further payroll problems; this was Article 7.1(g) which provided as follows:

“Excepting that notwithstanding any of the heretobeforementioned, that in the event the accrued remuneration shall not be tendered to those entitled thereto upon the designated day prior to the sounding of the five o’clock pm (North Pole Standard Time) horn, it is hereby understood, acknowledged and agreed that there shall immediately be put into effect a lawful and properly constituted work stoppage, such stoppage to continue and stay in effect until such time as all accrued remuneration, salary and entitlements are duly tendered and paid”³

³ Loosely translated into English, this means that if Santa Claus misses a payday, the elves strike until the coin is paid.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam looked out the window. They could see hundreds of elves streaming out of the workshop. As the last elf left, he closed the door behind him and chained it shut. A second elf posted a strike notice to the door. The North Pole was shut down.

“Boys!” a deep voice boomed out. The elves jumped to their feet and turned to the door. A large rotund figure filled the doorway.

“Didn’t I tell you not to screw up?” bellowed Santa Claus.

“Uh – well – uh,” explained Sam.

“We’ve got eight days until Christmas and I’ve got nobody making toys!”

“We’ll fix it,” said Iggy.

“Make sure you do!” barked Santa and turned away.

“What are we going to do?” said Sam.

Yugo lifted Lucretia’s postcard off of the stack of mail on the credenza. “We’re going to Samoa to get Miss Alopeesha,” he said.

“Better warm up the snowmobile,” said Iggy.

“Oh no, not again,” said Sam, striking his forehead with the palm of his hand. “Can’t we just jump off the building instead?”

DECEMBER 18

Readers of these tales will recall that Yugo had some years ago acquired a cherry red Model X-15 “snowbasher” snowmobile. In the years since, Yugo had made a number of modifications to the snowbasher – he had enclosed the cab, installed a rumble seat, wheels, a 14 cylinder lithium fusion rocket engine, sonar, phasars, and wings among others. The snowmobile has a maximum ground speed of 290 kilometres per hour and maximum air speed of Mach II.

The elves were cruising at an altitude of 20,000 metres over the South Pacific Ocean when Iggy shook Sam by the shoulder.

“Wake up Sam,” he said, “we are almost there.”

Indeed, they could see the faint blue outline of the hills of Samoa in the distance. Yugo downshifted into 10th gear and began his descent.

Sam held his breath to keep his ears from popping. “This is the part of the trip I hate the most” he grunted.

“That was what you said when we took off,” said Iggy.

“And just after we levelled off” added Yugo.

“Why in the world would Lucy want to come here?” asked Sam, “it’s hot and there are lots of bugs...”

The snowmobile shuddered as it broke through some turbulent air as Yugo made his final approach.

“Now I remember,” said Sam. “This is the part I hate the most.”

“Actually Sam,” said Yugo, “Samoa is a very interesting place. It also has a number of very interesting Christmas traditions.” Yugo pulled back on the steering wheel and the front of the snowmobile lifted slightly as it glided over the beach.



“For example,” Yugo continued, “on Christmas Eve the children play a game called ‘Greasing the Baby’. The youngest child in the family is covered in the oil of cuccajuba beans and runs about the house while the older children try to catch it. Of course, it’s almost impossible to get a grip on a two year old soaked in cuccajuba bean oil, so the game can last for quite a while. Anyway, the child which catches the baby gets a special present.”

“And that’s not all,” added Yugo, “Santa Claus is believed to be a tall, tanned Samoan who wears a red Speedo and rides from home to home on a flying surfboard named Buddy. Good children are given fruits and berries and bad kids are lashed with palm fronds.”

Yugo bounced the snowmobile across the beach and spun it to a halt.

“That is definitely the worst part of the trip,” concluded Sam. “Come on, let’s find Lucy. This place is a little too weird for my liking. Imagine, fruit for Christmas. It’s ridiculous.”

The doors of the snowmobile swung upward on silent hydraulics. Iggy, Yugo and Sam stepped out onto the sand.

“Miss Alopeesha’s postcard had a picture of this beach with that hotel in the background,” said Iggy, pointing to a pastel pink stucco building at the edge of the beach. “Let’s see if she is staying there.”

The elves ambled across the thick white sand to the pink hotel. Iggy was beginning to regret wearing his thick wool tunic (the required uniform at the North Pole) to the South Pacific. “Oh well,” he thought, “at least I won’t get a sunburn.”

At the back of the hotel was a large wooden patio with a pool. At a bamboo covered bandstand a quartet of local musicians was playing a medley of Jimmy Buffet songs. Beside the pool there was an outdoor bar, where a number of young women in bikinis had gathered to listen to the band.

“Why don’t you guys look for Lucy in the lobby,” suggested Sam. “I’ll check to see if she is over at the pool.”

Iggy and Yugo shrugged and went inside. Sam strolled up to the bar and sat beside a tall blonde in a small swimsuit. “Hey babe,” he said, “can I buy you a drink?”

The blonde stared at Sam for a moment, carefully observing his pointed ears, red and green wool suit and short stature before answering “Buzz off Troll.”

Sam walked away from the bar, but called back, “it’s elf, not troll, elf!”

The rest of the women all turned away from him, making that annoying clucking noise women make when they are making fun of some guy.

Sam caught up to Iggy and Yugo in the lobby.

“Apparently Miss Alopeesha was here,” said Iggy, “but she left the day before yesterday.”

“Where to?” asked Sam.

“She left this address,” said Yugo, reading from some writing on a hotel napkin, “Hotel Domingo de Rapido del Mosquito, III Beachfront Road, Santiago, Chile.”

Sam rolled his eyes to the top of his head. “I suppose we’ll be leaving soon,” he said.

“Just as soon as we can,” answered Yugo.

“It’s just as well, I guess,” said Sam. “I was not having much luck poolside.”

Even at Mach II it took 5 hours to fly from Samoa to Chile, and though the days are long there in December, the sun was setting as the elves walked down Beachfront Road and stopped before the Hotel Domingo de Rapido del Mosquito.

To describe it as luxurious, opulent and well maintained would be to use these three adjectives absolutely incorrectly. To describe it as shabby, cheap and run-down would be a much better and more accurate use of the English language.

They walked up to the dimly lit registration desk and asked the sleepy old man sitting there, which room Miss L. Alopeesha, was staying in. He stood up and walked to the thick book on the desk and ran his stubby brown finger down the page.

“We had an L.M. Alopeesha staying here,” he said, “but she checked out yesterday.”

The elves sighed in a kind of melancholy three-part harmony.

“Did she leave a forwarding address?” asked Iggy.

“She did indeed,” replied the old man. “She said she would be travelling to a little bed and breakfast she had heard of in Abidjan.”

“Where is that?” asked Sam.

“It’s in the Ivory Coast,” answered Yugo, who really did know the answer to just about everything. “Did she leave an address in Abidjan?”

“No, but the name of the place is apparently the Wayward Zulu. I remember it only because it sounded rather gruesome.” Said the old man.

Iggy looked at the others. “Yugo, I know you’re tired, you’ve been flying all day. Why don’t we stay here tonight and go to Africa in the morning?”

Yugo and Sam nodded. The old man clapped his hands in delight. “Wonderful,” he said. “Tomorrow is the beginning of our mid-winter feast to celebrate the coming of Christmas and the arrival of Zantha Close.”

“Who is Zantha Close?” asked Sam.

“Well,” explained the old man, “he is a kindly old gentleman who lives at the South Pole. Each Christmas Eve he travels to the homes of all the good girls and boys in Chile on Buddy, his flying donkey and leaves presents for each of them in the kitchen sink.”

“Man, have you got your poles mixed up,” began Sam. “There is nothing at the South Pole but snow and penguins who so not have enough sense to get out of the cold. And his name is Santa, not Zantha, and he doesn’t have a donkey, he has –“



At that point Sam's lecture was cut short by a vicious elbow to his ribs. "Please do not belittle our hosts traditions," whispered Iggy. Iggy turned to their host. "Have you a room?" he asked.

"Yes indeed," said the old man, and he drew a key from the shelf behind him and gave it to Iggy. "Room 112, it's just down the hall. Go make yourselves comfortable. And you really should get out to those wool coats. It's is not that chilly in Chile this time of year.

The elves made their way down the hall to Room 112. Though it was shabby, cheap and run-down; the beds were comfortable and in no time at all they were sound asleep.

DECEMBER 19

The elves slept late and woke groggy, still feeling the effects of snowmobile lag. They had travelled through 8 time zones and really had no idea any longer what time it was.

When they arrived in the lobby to check out, the old man who had welcomed them the night before greeted them.

"Come, come," he gestured; "you're just in time to join us for a real Chilean pre-Christmas feast!"

The elves looked at each other and then hungrily joined the old man at the big table that had been set in the dining room. The room itself was festooned with traditional Chilean Christmas Cheer - the freshly skinned yak hides, the slivers of broken glass and bottles of cough syrup on each windowsill.

Iggy drew his chair to the table and looked at his plate.

"We are serving Christmas dinner here every day this week," explained the old man. "In Chile, we sit down for the Christmas feast at noon and spend the rest of the day eating, eating, eating... We begin with jellied lamb's bladder and a Diet Coke™. Then peanut butter cookies, wood chips and beef consommé.

“Once the appetizers are cleared away we bring on the bird – a great roast pelican garnished with whipped duck bill and stuffed with shredded newspaper. And for dessert, chilled June bugs.”

The elves traded looks. “Suddenly, I’m not so hungry any more,” said Sam. “But the Diet Coke™ looks good.”

The elves drained their cokes and excused themselves. “Much as we would love to stay, “ said Iggy, “we really must be going – we have some important business to attend to in Africa.”

They settled their account and made their way back to the snowmobile. There, they discovered one last Chilean Christmas tradition – the snowmobile was covered in whipped cream and toast. No one knows why Chileans do this to red cars at Christmas time; maybe it is to celebrate the bounty of the harvest; maybe it’s just to drive people crazy.

It was mid-afternoon before the elves took off. Yugo quickly took the snowmobile up to cruising altitude and maximum speed. South America passed quickly beneath them, giving way to the deep blue Atlantic Ocean. At just that point they crossed another time zone.

DECEMBER 20

The strike was into its third day and another working day had been lost. Toy production was way behind schedule and if a solution was not reached within the next two or three days, Christmas would surely be cancelled

Iggy, Yugo and Sam reached the African coast and descended swiftly into Abidjan. With all of the time changes it was lunchtime again and the elves realized that they had not eaten since they sat down to the Chilean feast, and even then, none of them really ate much of anything.

They found a hot dog stand near the airport and they each ordered a couple of foot longs. Then they bought a map and wound their way through the streets of Abidjan to the front door of the ‘Wayward Zulu’. It was a cozy English style inn, with a pub on the first floor and guest rooms on the floors above.

The elves walked into the pub and found a table near the door. Almost at once a husky waitress came to the table.

“Boys, before I can serve you, I am going to have to see some I.D.”

“Actually, we don’t want anything to drink,” said Iggy, “we are looking for someone.”

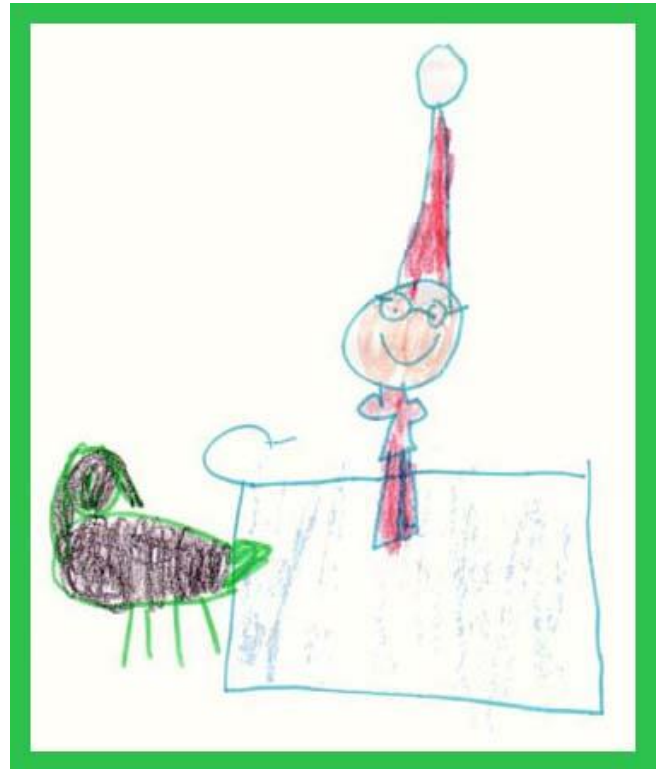
The waitress drummed her fingers on her serving tray. Iggy continued, “her name is Lucretia Alopeesha and she travels about in a sleigh pulled by a flying reindeer.”

“Who does she think she is?” asked the waitress “Sinter Klouse?”

“Who’s Sinter Klouse?” asked Yugo.

The waitress looked at Yugo like he might be an elf from the North Pole.

“Sinter Klouse is the fellow who delivers presents to boys and girls every Christmas. You know, he rides in a carriage pulled by two enormous hounds named Buddy and Jake. He comes through the window at night and leaves presents in the sock drawer. Everyone knows that.”



“Well, we’re – uh – not from around these parts,” said Sam.

“I guess not – no one wears wool jackets in Africa.”

Iggy asked, “have you seen our friend?”

Actually, someone of that description was staying here, but I think she left this morning.”

Sam leaned forward and started banging his head on the table. “I’m getting very tired of this. Can’t Lucy just settle down and stay in one place? She



stayed at the North Pole for 15 years, why can’t she stay anywhere else for two days?

“Where was she going?” asked Iggy.

“She said something about Amsterdam,” answered the waitress.

“We’re getting closer, we’d better leave right away,” said Yugo.

“Oh you can’t go now,” said the waitress. “Today is the shortest day of the year – only 11 ½ hours of daylight. This afternoon we’re having the running of the rats.”

“What?” said Sam.

“The Running of the Rats. It’s an old Christmas tradition. On the winter solstice everyone sweeps all the rats into the streets and we chase them into the hills.”

“That is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard!” said Sam. “What kind of a goofy custom is that?”

The waitress looked horrified. Iggy jabbed Sam in the ribs again. “Sam, you’re awful. Everyone’s customs seem strange to others – don’t you think it’s odd to cut down a tree and set it up in a room, or to hang socks by the fireplace, or to wear crepe paper hats for dinner or to try and eat hard, black and tasteless Christmas pudding? All of that would seem pretty strange to someone from foreign lands.”

The waitress stared at the elves with even greater horror.

“Everyone’s culture and traditions deserve respect,” finished Iggy. Sam nodded.

“I guess you are right,” he looked up at the waitress. “I’m sorry,” he said.

The waitress snorted. “You do all those things? You guys are weird!” She spun around and walked away quickly in disgust.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam burst out laughing. They left the ‘Wayward Zulu’ together, but found the streets impassable. They were filled with rats, scurrying in fear from the crowds that followed them, screaming and hollering as they passed. It was nearly 3 hours before they made their way back to the snowmobile.

They climbed in and Yugo fired up the turbines that charged the atomic batteries. He pulled a green lever, spun a red dial and the rocket engines roared to life. He lowered the hand brake and the snowmobile rolled forward and ground to a halt. There was a chittering sound and six large rats climbed out from under the dash.

“Yearrgh” yearrghed Sam.

Iggy shooed the rats out of the snowmobile. Yugo studied his instrument display carefully and then gently reinitiated the ignition sequence.

“I hope none of those rats got near the phase inductors. Some of the fusion components are very delicate. He slipped the snowmobile into gear and it jerked forward. He tapped a flashing yellow button and the snowmobile rose into the air.

“I wish I was getting frequent flyer points for all of these trips,” said Sam. He looked out the window and watched the North African Coast slip into the Mediterranean Sea beneath them. Soon they were flying over the lush green fields of the Netherlands.

“I’ll initiate the landing sequence,” said Yugo. He pulled a green switch and the snowmobile began to slowly descend. Suddenly there was a tremendous pop.

“Uh oh,” said Yugo, “the particle accelerator is jammed. Those rats have damaged the Rochester foil. And with all the miles we’ve logged the last few days the electron stabilizers must have overheated. I’ve dumped the ion stream into the cooling sump. That should help create a pressure differential and allow the inertial batteries to recharge. In the meantime, I’ll realign the polarizers to bring the circuit back on line.”

Iggy and Sam nodded thoughtfully, though neither of them had a clue what Yugo was talking about.

“Do you think it will work?” asked Iggy.

“It had better. If it doesn’t we could have a meltdown and then there will be nothing we can do.”

Just then there was a loud hissing sound and fluorescent blue vapour began steaming out of the cooling vents.

“Oh fuddle,” said Yugo. He punched an orange button but the vapour kept pouring out. “We’ve got a core breach, I’m going to red alert.” He hit a red flashing toggle switch and the interior lights went scarlet. The snowmobile began to lose altitude and tilt very uncomfortably to the left.

Yugo was frantically stabbing at all manner of switches, buttons and dials but it was to no avail.

“I’ve tried resetting the stabilizers but the phase inductors won’t come back on line,” shouted Yugo. Pieces of trim were peeling away from the doors of the snowmobile.

The engine backfired loudly and the snowmobile shuddered violently. In the passenger cabin oxygen masks dropped from the ceiling.

“The life support systems have shut down,” said Yugo. “I can’t guarantee that I’ll be able to hold out much longer!” There was another reverberating backfire. The snowmobile spun uncontrollably and went into a spiralling dive.

“Only one chance left,” grunted Yugo. “Better fasten your seatbelts.” Iggy and Sam immediately buckled up.

“Don’t you have some special modification to handle this situation?” asked Sam.

“Yes, I do,” answered Yugo. “Hold on tight.” He slid a black cover aside to reveal a flashing red button. He pressed it with his thumb.

The roof of the snowmobile blew off and the leather bucket seats burst out of the snowmobile into the clear afternoon sky.

“Eeyargh!” hollered Sam as his seat tumbled slowly through the air. As they reached the apex of their flight, a small package at the back of each seat popped open, allowing large colored parachutes to unfurl.



The elves swung gently beneath the parachutes and descended slowly to the ground. They stared helplessly as the snowmobile twisted and jerked about then began to disintegrate. The wings sheared off and the body panels began to peel away. There was a hideous metallic shredding noise and then the remains for the snowmobile exploded in a ball of orange nuclear fire and plunged into the chilly waters of the North Atlantic Ocean. A cloud of steam shot up from the sea; the only sign of the final resting place of the snowmobile, which had been completely and utterly destroyed.

The three ejector seats drifted to a gentle landing on the outskirts of Amsterdam at the base of a slowly turning windmill. The elves unbuckled their seat belts, rose and started the long walk down the cobblestone street into the city. Yugo was in a daze, and Iggy had to yell at him to stop at a roadside French fry stand.

“Hey, how about some fries?” asked Iggy, “I’m buying.”

Yugo nodded, but did not say a word. Iggy ordered 3 bags of fries. The young woman behind the counter filled 3 wax paper bags with thick brown fries. She picked up a white plastic bottle and squeezed mayonnaise on each of the orders and passed them to Iggy.

The elves wrinkled their noses, but they were hungry so they ate the fries. They were really good.

They had no idea where to find Lucretia, but a few inquiries respecting the whereabouts of a woman with a flying sled led them to a little hotel overlooking a park and the canal adjacent to the Heineken Brewery. Sam suggested they stop at the Brewery for a few minutes and a couple of cool ones, but the others hurried him along.

It was cool and rainy, and for the first time the elves felt comfortable in their wool jackets. They reached a spacious green lawn. Along the sidewalk a half dozen painters quietly worked on colored canvases.

Then they saw it – on the opposite side of the park beside a wooden bench was a small but brilliantly bright red one horse open sleigh; there was no horse hitched to the sleigh, rather there was an enormous reindeer with antlers spanning nearly 3 metres.⁴

They dashed across the park and then they found her. Miss Alopeesha was sitting on the bench, with a small glass of Amstel in one hand and a thick romance novel in the other.

“Miss Alopeesha, Miss Alopeesha!” called Iggy.

Lucretia looked up from her book and smiled. “Well, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes. Whatever are you three doing here? You should be making toys!”

“That is the problem,” explained Yugo. “Nobody is making toys.” He went on to explain the whole sad story, which was previously related earlier in this story.

⁴ I realize this is an absolutely brutal run-on sentence, but I tried to write it about four or five times and just could not make it work. So just don't get on my case, now that this sentence is behind us, the story can only get better.



“Didn’t you get my card?” asked Lucretia, “I put the payroll access code in it.”

“You did?” asked Iggy.

“Sure. It’s ‘applesauce’. Don’t forget applesauce.” She explained.

Iggy remembered the postscript to Miss Alopeesha’s card. ‘Don’t forget applesauce’. It still seemed a little obscure to him.

“Well I can see you people really need me. We’d better get going.”

“What about your vacation?” asked Sam.

“Oh this vacation thing was beginning to get a little old,” said Miss Alopeesha. “I’ve been all over the world, but no matter where I went Christmas was different, it wasn’t like it is at home. And Christmas at home really is the best.

“Take this place for example. Do you know that every Christmas Eve families gather for dinner and when the meal is over, they pour flammable chemicals on themselves and light parts of their bodies on fire? Have you ever heard of anything so ridiculous? Have you ever heard of anything so dangerous? And what has it got to do with Christmas anyway? No, Christmas is best spent at home with your family.”

Lucretia smiled, “and you guys are my family”.

“Really, Miss Alopeesha?” asked Iggy.

“Of course,” said Lucretia. “And please, call me Lucy.”

With that Lucretia tossed back the rest of her Amstel, threw her novel into the sled and climbed in after it. She patted the seat beside her. "Aren't you going to join me?" she asked.

The elves jumped into the sled with her. After all, they had no other way to get home.

Lucretia pulled on the reins and the reindeer leapt into the sky, pulling the sled along behind him. Lucretia looked over at Yugo, who was still in some kind of shock. She passed the reins to him.

Yugo looked back at her and smiled.

"Why don't you drive," she said. "You probably know the way better than I do."

Yugo grinned and hollered "Northward Ho!" With that, they were finally on their way home.

DECEMBER 21

Lucretia Alopeesha walked into her office earlier than usual that morning. She manoeuvred her mouse about her desk and rebooted the computer. She typed in 'applesauce' and was immediately put into the payroll program. She deposited the outstanding paycheques into each elf's account then sent out word that all elves were to report for work by 7:00 am. The chains came down from the toyshop and all of the elves marched inside. It was going to take a little overtime, but it looked like Christmas was going to happen after all.

EPILOGUE: DECEMBER 28

Of course Christmas was saved. Santa made his trip around the world as he always did, leaving fruit for good children in Samoa and toys in the sock drawers of the children of the Ivory Coast.

Lucretia was back at work and looked as though she might never take another vacation. Negotiations had commenced on a new collective bargaining agreement but informed sources suggested they had bogged down over the issue of a proposed salary cap.

However, 3 days after Christmas all was forgotten as Iggy, Yugo and Sam joined several other elves in the stables to witness the birth of a new baby reindeer. They watched in amazement as the new foal awkwardly rose to its feet and took its tentative first steps.

Santa Clause walked into the stables. "Well, well," he said, "a real Christmas miracle. Who knows, maybe in a few years he will be leading my team. I think I'll name him Buddy."

- THE END -

POST SCRIPT

I knocked off this story in 3 nights just before I had to turn it in. Because of this, I had no time to research foreign Christmas traditions as I had intended. Accordingly, all of the customs that are described (except for greasing the baby) are completely made up. Any resemblance to actual Christmas traditions is purely coincidental.

POSTSCRIPT II

LEUKRETIA ALOPECIA: Traumatic condition in which as a result of fright or some other event one's hair falls out to be replaced by white hair. It's what they call it when you are scared so badly your hair turns white. It really happens. You can look it up.