

# The Man in Sandy Clothes

## A Dune Tune

### OVERTURE

IT ISN'T EASY BEING SANTA CLAUS. In fact, a lot of the time, it is a right royal pain in the neck. There are just so many toys to deliver every Christmas to so many children all over the world. So far to travel in so little time every year. No kid older than seven thinks you are real. It is a tremendous responsibility for one man. Nope, there is never a quiet day for Santa Claus.

I should know. After all, I am Santa Claus.

I've been in this business for a couple of thousand years now, and it gets tougher every year. First of all, there are more people out there than ever before, and that's a lot of chimneys to climb down every Christmas Eve. There are a lot more toys now, too. It used to be that wooden horses or rag dolls were about the only things in my bag. Now there are action figures and remote control race cars and computer games and lots of other things that I can't even begin to explain to you.

We use big machines to make the toys now, and assembly lines. We have computers to keep track of inventory and payroll and who's been naughty and who's been nice.

I even have a television set in my study now. I never used to have one. I don't even know why I have this one. There is never anything on.

I'm not just saying that. There aren't any television stations within 3000 miles of the North Pole, and I don't have cable. There's never anything on. I don't even know why I bought the darn thing, it just seemed that every living room I crept into had one, so I thought I should pick one up.

It wasn't always this way. When I started out, it was a lot simpler. I didn't need assembly lines or computers or televisions that don't work. I had never even heard of the North Pole. I grew up in a much warmer place.

I was telling all this to my friend Iggy last summer. Iggy is a junior elf, first class; one of my best men in the toy train and video games lines. "Used to be I didn't need elves," I told Iggy. "Used to be I did it all myself."

Iggy asked what I meant and I told him the story of how I got into this business. He told me I should write it down.

I chuckled a little "ho ho ho" at that. After all, I'm Santa Claus, one of the busiest men in the world. When was I going to find the time to write anything like that down? But then I figured, it's only July now, there's seven months until Christmas. And since the sun is up all night (or as far up in the sky as it ever gets in this part of the world, which isn't very high at all) and I can't sleep anyway, I decided that Iggy was probably right and I should put it all down on paper.

Who knows? Maybe someday somebody will want to buy the movie rights.

## **LET THERE BE STARLIGHT**

THIS ALL STARTED A COUPLE of thousand years ago. My name was Harold Angells then, and I was a carpenter in a little town called Bethlehem. Maybe you've heard of it. It's pretty famous now, but back then it wasn't much more than a couple of dusty streets with a few dozen clay buildings. I built furniture,

mostly tables and chairs, and when business was slow, I'd carve little animal statues out of wood. I'd set them up on shelves in my store and sometimes merchants passing through town would buy them for their kids. I never made much money at it, but it helped to pass the time.

Then one night, I was awoken by a bright light shining through my curtains. At first, I thought I had overslept, but when I pulled aside the drape, I could see that it was still night. Yet, in the dark blue sky, a single star glowed like a small sun.

I pulled on my trousers and my canvas carpenter's apron and stepped out onto the street. Not many people were out at that time of night, but those that were were all slowly making their way to where the star seemed to be shining the brightest; which was the stable beside Old Hassan's inn.

I'd known Hassan the Hittite for years and I can honestly say he was one of the meanest and stingiest men who ever lived. His inn always did a pretty good business, and, despite the outrageous prices he was charging, the place was packed that winter because of all the people who had come from out of town to participate in the census. I'd heard Hassan was even renting space in his barn.

When we got there the barn was filled with people. There were shepherds and merchants, carpenters and kings. Every one of them had gathered to see what had happened there. I worked my way to the front of the crowd. They were all standing about staring at a little baby lying in the hay trough. Surprisingly, given all of the people there, it was a pretty silent night. The only sound was some kid banging away on a little toy drum. *Pa rum pa pum pum, pa rum pa pum pum. Pa rum pa pum pum. Pa rum pa pum pum. Pa rum pa pum pum.* A lot of days I still hear that childish beat in my head. *Pa rum pa pum pum. Pa rum pa pum pum.* Somebody ought to write a song like that.

I stepped up to the manger and knelt down beside it. The baby looked up at me, and though he was only a few hours old, he smiled at me.

I felt like I ought to give something to the baby. People always want to give presents to babies. They do now, and they did back then. Some things never change. I dug through the pocket of my carpenter's apron hoping I might

find something appropriate. I felt some nails, wood chips and my carving knife. Then my hand settled on the little wooden horse I had carved that morning. I rooted it out and laid it by the baby's side. He turned to look at it and seemed to glow with some kind of golden light. I breathed that radiant light in like air. I felt completely at peace. I felt younger and stronger than I had in years.

Something happened to me that night. I don't know what it was and I don't know how it happened. It must have been some kind of magic, or maybe even something holy, but from that day to this, I haven't aged a day. Oh, I've put on a few pounds over the years; who hasn't, but I'm the same age that I was that night.

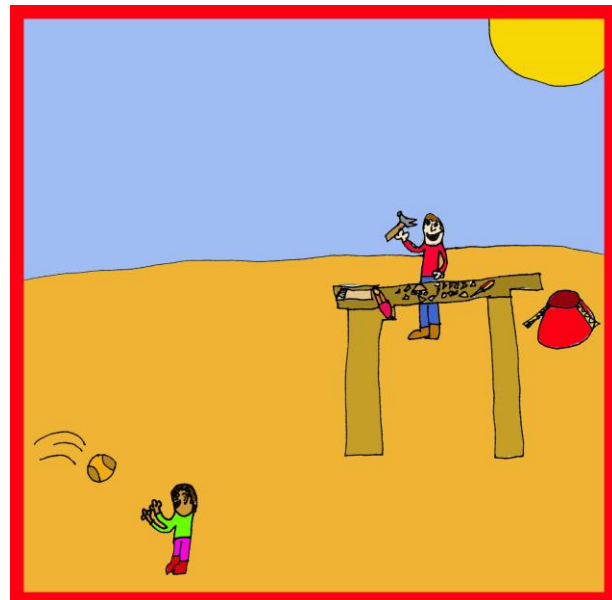
I realized at that moment that I had begun my life's real work. No more building chairs and tables. I would spend the rest of my days making toys and giving them to children. Giving them to children everywhere. I started making toys the next morning.

I had no idea then how very many days I had left.

## THE MAN IN SANDY CLOTHES

I CARVED A FEW DONKEYS AND CAMELS and passed them out to the children who walked by the shop. They would gasp or laugh in surprise when I pressed one of my toys into their tiny, dirty hands. The joy on their faces was indescribable.

You have to understand that most of the children in those days didn't have much time to play with toys. Children were expected to work most of the time; hauling water, tanning hides, tending to camels, that sort of thing. My toys



gave them a break from their days of drudgery. To them, my toys were like a splash of rain in the desert.

This went on for some time, but then it occurred to me that I was giving toys to the same couple of dozen kids again and again. So I decided that I would go a little further afield, to get to the children that I had been missing.

I took all of the toys that I had made that week and put them into a red wool sack. I hoisted the sack up over my shoulder and walked out into the street. I passed out toys to the children who saw me, and when I could find no more children, I started going door to door to deliver them. Every time I passed out one of my toys, I saw the smiling face of the baby in the manger reflected in the child in front of me.

But I still wasn't reaching enough children. I decided that I should make a trip to some of the neighboring towns. I worked for a month making dolls and little animals and loaded them onto a cart. Then I set out onto the dusty road for the next city.

I walked for about three days until I reached Al Khalil. It isn't much of a town now, and it wasn't much of a town then. But there were children there, working by the city gates clearing trash. I walked up to one of the smallest children, a little girl, and reached into my bag.

"Here you are," I said, presenting her with a little rag doll I had made from some scrap linen from my shop.

The little girl looked up at me with her soft brown eyes and smiled. Then she squeezed the doll tightly and ran through the gates, calling for her parents.

"Mama, Papa," I heard her call. A man and woman stepped towards her. "Look what I have," she cried, waving the doll at them.

The mother kneeled down and held the doll. "Where did you get this?" she asked.

The little girl pointed towards me. "Over there," she said. "From that man. That man in the sandy clothes."

Meanwhile, several of the other children had gathered around me. "Sandy clothes," they called, "have you a gift for us?"

I glanced down at my robe and, sure enough, it was coated in sand from my walk across the desert. I started pulling toys from my sack and passing them around.

"Thank you, sandy clothes," the children said. Of course they didn't know my name, they only knew me by how I was dressed. And I've been Sandy Clothes ever since.

I've picked up a lot of other names over the years. In some places I'm Saint Nicholas, in others I'm Father Christmas or Kris Kringle; but I've always liked Sandy Clothes, or Santa Claus, the best.

## **THE BAD SAMARITANS**

I CARRIED ON IN THIS FASHION for nearly a year. Whenever I had made enough toys to fill my bag, I would head out into the streets of Bethlehem to hand out my toys. Once in a while I went to Al Khalil or Masabra or even as far as Rib-el-Fihr. That was a long way to travel without a cart or even a camel. Still, I was happier then than I had ever been in my life.

That was, until the day that I received a visit from a Raheem and Maddog. Raheem Praheem Gondreem Bahjeem and Maddog Fez-Walker were a pair of old Samaritans<sup>1</sup> who had made it big in the water business and owned most of the oases around town. They also ran a huge salt quarry outside of the city. This gave them the best of all worlds. People needed salt to live, but it also made them thirsty. And when they got thirsty, Maddog and Raheem were there to sell them some water, which only washed away the salt they had just eaten.

A lot of the businesses their businesses operated on the edge of the law, many people thought they probably operated on the other side of that edge, but

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<sup>1</sup>Samaritans were people who came from Samaria. You may have heard of "the Good Samaritan." Don't be confused. Sure, there were lots of good Samaritans. But just like every other group, there were lots of Samaritans who were just plain jerks.

no one had ever been able to prove it. Anyway, they depended on children as a ready source of cheap labour, both in their salt mines and digging new water wells. Apparently, my activities in recent weeks had been putting a bit of a dent on their business.

They were waiting outside my shop one morning when I arrived to open up. I nodded at them. They stepped forward, their arms crossed and their faces clinched in vicious frowns.

"Just who do you think you are giving out toys to the children?" Raheem shouted at me. I opened my mouth to reply, but he pointed his finger at the side of my nose and kept on shouting.

"The children in this town are spending all of their time playing with your toys. Children are supposed to work. They have no time to waste playing with toys," he barked.

Then Maddog stepped up to me and pointed his finger directly at my other nostril. "You listen to me old man," he said, his voice quavering, "you leave our children alone. We have a business to run, and we won't stand for any more of your interference."

"Just what are you getting at, Maddog," I asked politely, pushing their fingers away from my face.

Maddog sneered at me. "Just leave the children alone," he answered.

"Don't say we didn't warn you," added Raheem, and with a swirl of their robes, they spun like a pair of Bedouin dancers and slipped away.

I didn't take any of the things they said too seriously. Raheem and Maddog were pretty rich and powerful in town, but they only made me appreciate that the children of Bethlehem needed me more than I had known. Perhaps if I had listened to them, things would have turned out a lot differently.

I kept right on making toys and passing them out. In fact, I had almost entirely stopped making and repairing furniture altogether. This had created another problem for me. Making toys and giving them to children made me feel

great, but it was expensive and, so long as I was ignoring my furniture business, it wasn't putting any food on my table.

I had given this problem a lot of thought. It was clear that I could not continue what I was doing indefinitely and that I was going to have to cut back in some way. But how? Was I to give toys to some children, but not others? And if so, how was I to decide which children would get toys and which would not? Maybe I could just give toys out once in a while and devote the rest of my time to paying work.

It was during the time that I was mulling over these difficult issues that some of my decisions were made for me.

I arrived at my shop the next morning at my usual time to find that there was no shop there at all. I was sure it had been there the night before, but now it was gone. This sort of thing sometimes happens in these little desert towns; my shop wasn't much more than a big tent with some tools and equipment and these things can disappear in a sandstorm. But there had been no sandstorm and the other shops on my street were all intact. No, there was clearly something sinister going on.

I didn't have to look far to find my answer. Under a stone where my shop used to be there was a piece of papyrus. Written upon it in old Samarian was this message: "Big boys don't play with toys."

## **HAROLD OF ARABIA**

IT WAS PRETTY PLAIN TO ME that Maddog and Raheem were behind this. But there was no way I would ever prove it. After all, it would just be the word of an old toymaker against that of two of the city's most successful businessmen. What chance did I have?

It was obvious that I had to make a few changes if I was going to continue making and giving away toys. The first thing I decided to do was to get out of town. This way, I could avoid greedy water merchants, and I could have more time to devote to making toys.

My grandmother had left me an acreage in the desert when she died. I hadn't been there for years, because, well, it was in the middle of the desert and was an absolutely awful place. But I figured it was perfect for what I had in mind. I could set up a real toy factory, in private, and deliver toys to the children in town whenever I wanted.

I gathered together all of my possessions and made my move to the desert. It was a hard life at first. The nearest oasis was two day's walk away, so I had to dig my own well. The first three holes I dug just turned up a sticky black liquid. Finally, on my fourth try, I struck water and began my operations in earnest.

Let me tell you what things were like in those days. My home was a pair of tents beside a small well. I lived in the smaller tent where I kept my little cot and my box of personal belongings. I really didn't have much left after Maddog and Raheem had cleaned out my shop, but living on my own in the desert, I didn't need very much.

The bigger tent was where things really happened. It was a long and narrow tent that contained a long and narrow work bench. I set up a one man assembly line there. At one end I kept my carving tools and some pieces of raw wood. In the morning, I spent a little time there whittling the basic components I needed for my toys; dolls heads, wagon wheels, that sort of thing.

After lunch, or when I just wanted to do something a little different, I would push my finished work a few feet to my right where I kept my sanding and painting implements. I would spend a few hours there decorating the basic parts before pushing them down a few more feet where I kept my assembling tools like hammers and nails and screws and things. I would put the final product together there and then push it off the end of the table into a big red sack that I hung there with a hook. When the sack was full, I would close it up, throw it over my shoulder and head into town.

Since I was now located about an equal distance from five or six small communities, I decided I would go into a different town each month. Always on the 25th; that was the day I had seen the baby in the manger. I also decided I would travel at night. This wasn't to avoid being seen by Maddog, Raheem or

their ilk; it is just a lot cooler at night in the middle of the desert, and hauling toys in a red wool sack is hot and heavy work.

That brings me to the last part of my little camp. I had a small pen where I kept an old camel. I had purchased him at an auction to help me move my belongings into the desert. He was the last camel to be auctioned that day, so I was able to get him pretty cheaply. I expect no one wanted him because he had a red runny nose. He must have had some kind of camel flu. While I was able to restore his health over the next few weeks, his nose always kept it's red colour. I didn't mind really. It almost seemed to glow at night when I was traveling into town, and it helped me to read my maps.

I named him Ulf. I know it sounds like a strange name for a camel, but Ulf Ramahamaramaran was a popular singer at the time, and a lot of people had camels named after him. Because he smelled so badly, I often called him Rude Ulf. By the time he was healthy again, I still called him Rude Ulf. The name had stuck.

Soon the word of my monthly visits with Rude Ulf to the various towns had become a bit of a sensation. I would be greeted in the town square by the children. Some of them even started to decorate their houses because they knew I was coming. I guess they figured their houses would stand out if they were lit up. I suppose that's why people still put lights on their houses at Christmas. It certainly makes them easier to see from the air.

## **ELVES, THEMSELVES**

AS YOU CAN IMAGINE, this was getting to be a pretty big job for just one guy. I was making all of the toys and delivering them every month all by myself.

I tried to hire an apprentice, but none of the junior carpenters I spoke to were at all interested. Looking back, I could see why. Would you want to come out to the middle of the desert to learn a trade making toys, only to give away everything you worked on for nothing? It wasn't exactly an attractive career that I was offering these fellows. So I just carried on, working most every minute of the day at one end of my long table or the other.

I started to realize I might be suffering from some kind of exhaustion. I wasn't eating much, but I always seemed to be running out of food and water and having to travel into town to get additional supplies. Then, one morning, I walked into my workshop and saw that all of the parts I had been working on the night before were assembled into completed toys. I couldn't remember having done it, but I must have as there was no one else within leagues of my work bench. The toys were well constructed, too. At least my fatigue wasn't affecting the quality of my work.

I set the completed toys into my bag and started work carving and shaping some new parts. I was working on dolls that day, and I had always found carving the hands to be quite difficult. My own fingers are large, and the precise carving of the little fingers of the dolls requires a fairly delicate touch. I couldn't seem to manage it that morning, so I got up and went for a walk.

When I returned, all of the dolls arms were lying in a neat row, with each delicate hand perfectly carved. Now I knew I needed to get some help. I was beginning to lose touch with reality.

I stepped backwards, away from the bench and thought I heard a faint rustling sound. I strained to listen harder but there was nothing. Then I heard something that sounded like a sneeze. I spun around quickly. I was still anxious about my dealings with Raheem and Maddog and was worried they might have found my new work shop in the desert.

But it was no hard hearted Samaritan I saw when I looked around. In fact, I didn't see anything. Still, I was sure I had heard a sneeze. Thinking it might be a desert animal, I looked down. I saw nothing unusual except perhaps a shadow in the corner of my vision. I strained to look harder.

Then, something stepped out of the shadows, and I saw them for the first time. There were three little men there, dressed in the white linen of some of the desert tribes. But they were different than any other desert nomads I had ever seen. They were really short for one thing, maybe two cubits tall at the most. They had sharp pointed features. Now, it's not that unusual to see a man with a pointed nose, or a pointed chin, but these fellows had pointed ears as well.

I asked who they were and what they were doing in my shop. The tallest<sup>2</sup> of the three stepped forward, bowed respectfully and introduced himself to me. "My name is Izzy. My companions," he gestured to the other two little people, "are Hugh-Joe and Sahim. We are members of the Elvess."

I had never heard of the Elvess before and told Izzy that. He explained that they were a small band of roving desert nomads of perhaps thirty in number. They had been exiled because they were too small to hunt and their pointed ears made them freaks among their own people. They had traveled alone for some years, sneaking into other camps and stealing food or water. They were able to avoid discovery not only because of their small size, but because of some innate gift they had for hiding. This was obviously true, for Izzy told me that they had lived in and around my own camp for several weeks. I had never seen them once.

"You wouldn't have found us at all if Hugh-Joe hadn't sneezed when he did," grumbled Sahim. Hugh-Joe's face reddened.

"But what were you doing in my toy shop?" I asked.

"We felt badly about taking so much of your food and water over these past few weeks," answered Izzy. "We could see that you had been working very hard, and Hugh-Joe suggested that we give you a hand."

It turned out that Hugh-Joe had a real knack with tools, and easily taught himself how to make toys. He showed Izzy and Sahim some of the basics, and soon they were all slipping into my tent when I was out and helping me finish my work.

It was immediately obvious that the Elvess and I could help each other. They needed a home and I needed some help. That very day I welcomed them to join me and they accepted. They set up their tents and began making toys. The Elvess have been working for me ever since.

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<sup>2</sup> It would perhaps be more accurate to describe him as the least small of the three. The word 'tallest' just does not seem to work in any sentence describing these little people.

Unfortunately, not all of the Elvess were particularly adept at working with tools. In fact, some of them were downright awful. But they were all exceptionally sly and crafty at hiding. In fact, I learned that the Elvess are so good at hiding, that you can't even see one standing right in front of you, unless the Elvess wants you to. I don't know how they do it, but this gave me an answer to one of the problems that had been troubling me since the first days of my venture.

There were simply too many children out there, even with the help of the Elvess, and some of them just didn't deserve new toys. You know the kind of children I'm talking about; the mewling, crying, complaining kind. The ones that throw rocks at camels, or poke their sisters in the eyes, or steal fruit from merchants. These children were nothing like the child in the stable and I had no wish to reward them with any of the toys I had made.

So I asked some of the Elvess if they could keep a lookout for me. Tell me which children were naughty and which were nice. They took to the task with vigor and every morning I had new reports on my table, listing children who were kind and others who were not so kind. Happily, the list of good children has always been much longer than the list of bad ones.

The Elvess, or elves as most people call them today, are still hiding in corners and behind doors, keeping watch on people for me. And every day I get a list on my desk of good children and bad. Don't think for a minute, as some foolish people do, that there is no such thing as elves. The only reason you've never seen one, is that the elves don't want you to see them. Believe me when I tell you that my elves have seen you.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>For example, Ziggy, one of the little fellows who works for me told me all about what you did in the shower last month. I bet you never even noticed him. In fact, I'm sure of it. So next time you hear that song, you know, the one that goes "he sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake . . .", believe it.

## UP UP AND AWAY

ONCE THE ELVESS JOINED MY TEAM, things really started to take off. With all of the toys that the Elvess could build, I wasn't limited to traveling to one city every month anymore; I could go to every city.

Of course, poor old Rude Ulf wasn't up to carrying all of those toys on his back. So, with Hugh-Joe's help, I built a sand sled that we could hitch up to Rude Ulf and which he could tow behind him. And when the toys became too numerous and heavy to carry this way, we bought a whole team of camels and hooked them up to a special hitch of Hugh-Joe's design.

That first camel team was something to see. There was Nasty Ed, Rotten Ronnie, Smelly Floyd, Foul Bruce, Evil 'Ol Stan and of course, Stinky Pete. It is no easy task getting eight camels to work as a single team. As you might know, camels have about eleven joints in each leg, and when they started to run, it looked something like eight separate steam locomotives charging in eight different directions.

This was when we discovered one of the most amazing things about camels; they're kind of stupid. Actually, stupid isn't quite right, camels are reasonably intelligent, for bad-smelling, single-minded beasts. But it is this single mindedness which led us to their most important quality.

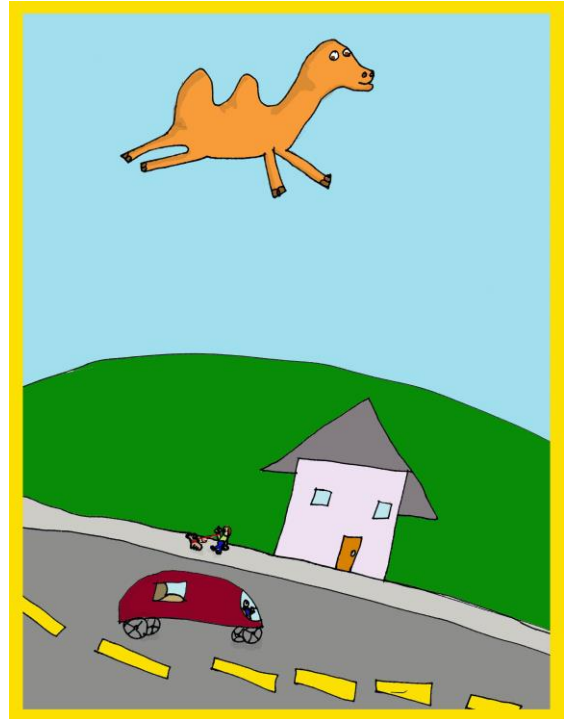
You may have heard that old saying "you have to learn to fall before you can learn to fly." In those days it was still a pretty new saying and we discovered that there was a lot of truth in it. You see, when a camel is running (or eating or sleeping), his attention is focused on that task to the exclusion of everything else in the world. And when camels have to run as a team, they are so focused on running straight and fast, that they absolutely can not do anything else. And when one of those camels trips or stumbles,<sup>4</sup> he is so intent on running ahead as fast as he can that he will actually forget to fall down onto the ground.

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<sup>4</sup> Which, when you consider the natural clumsiness of camels and their proximity to other members of the team, usually happens about thirty seconds after they hear the words, 'Giddy-up'.

Once you forget about gravity, it makes flying a whole lot easier. This is what we trained the camels to do. We'd start out racing across the sand and eventually, one by one, the camels would each trip, stumble and fall over, but then just keep on going. In this way, we taught the camels to fly.

Once the team became airborne, it opened up the rest of the world to me. I didn't have to limit myself to just delivering toys and presents to the little desert towns, I could go to the big cities, like Carthage or Troy. And when they were sacked and burned, I carried on even further to Rome and Athens and the other capitals of Europe. I could to bring Christmas to the world.



This is just what we decided to do. Bring Christmas to the whole wide world. This was no small undertaking. It was going to take months of planning and preparation. Izzy reckoned that the Elvess would need the better part of a year to build enough toys to supply the children of the world.

So, after a meeting with all of the Elvess, we decided that I would make the trip just once a year. We picked December 25. It was still about 11 months away, and, of course, was the same day that I had first seen the baby in the manger. It seemed only fitting to make the trip that day. And what a trip it would be. The whole world in a night. I could hardly wait.

## A CHRISTMAS ANGEL

THIS EXPEDITION WAS GOING to require a lot of toys. Thousands of them. And thousands of toys required thousands of parts. We didn't have nearly enough wood and paint to make that many toys. Therefore, the first step in this project would be to gather the resources we needed to pull it off.

So, rather than start by making toys, so we started off building tables and chairs that we could sell to raise the money to finance our trip. Once we had sold enough to outfit the trip, we would get down to the serious business of building toys.

For over three months the Elvess and I built furniture in our shop. We built front seats, back seats and love seats; easy chairs, rocking chairs and rolling chairs; coffee tables, end tables and beginning tables.<sup>5</sup> Finally, we had enough to take into market. We loaded up the sleigh Hugh-Joe had built with furniture and hitched it up to our team of camels. Rude Ulf, naturally, led the way.

I asked Izzy, Hugh-Joe and Sahim to come with me. I was going to need help unloading the furniture when I got into town. They climbed into the back of the sled and hid among the various seats and stools that were piled there. When I turned around, I couldn't see them at all. Then, I heard Sahim complain that Hugh-Joe was sitting on his foot. Satisfied they were all aboard, I called out to Rude Ulf to lead the way.

The big camel lurched forward, stumbling almost immediately and knocking the others over like dominoes. They fell over one by one, but none of them fell down. We were flying! Rude Ulf and Evil 'Ol Stan kicked at the hot desert air and we were on our way.

Within an hour we were pulling through the gates of Bethlehem. They weren't so much gates as they were posts that the town council hoped to hang some gates on someday, but they showed the way to the marketplace in the centre of town. Hugh-Joe had hung bells on the side of the sled so that people would hear us riding into town. By the time we reached the market, we expected a large crowd would have gathered behind us. After all, it isn't everyday that you see a sled loaded with furniture being pulled through town behind a team of eight flying camels. But, to our surprise and disappointment, no one came out to look at us, no one had followed us and when we reached the marketplace, we found that it was completely deserted.

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<sup>5</sup>Hugh-Joe even designed a line of handsome deck chairs. Unfortunately, the deck would not be invented for another 700 hundred years, so his elegant invention gathered dust in our shop for a long, long time.

You have to understand that this was pretty strange. Usually the market was a noisy and confusing place, filled with people talking and shouting while they haggled over the price they would pay for harps or hats, blankets or bracelets, cooking pots or cooking sausages. But today the place was empty. There was no noise and no confusion. That was because there were merchants and no customers. The place was absolutely empty.

I asked Izzy, Hugh-Joe and Sahim to unload the sled and set up our booth while I set out to learn where everyone was. Sahim grumbled a bit about this, but Izzy and Hugh-Joe set to the task with enthusiasm. Hugh-Joe had built an intricately designed fold out booth that he had stored under the sled. He pulled it out, and within moments he and Izzy had set it up and started piling the tables and chairs around it. Sahim grudgingly joined them.

I walked around the square, knocking at every door, but I received no answer. I turned up an alley, hoping to find someone there. But every street I walked down was as empty as the last.

I headed back to the market, ready to tell the Elvess that there was nobody to be found when I saw her. A hundred paces ahead of me a young woman was carrying a water pot on her head. Under the pot was the most beautiful pile of wavy brown hair I had ever seen.

I ran up to her and, panting, tapped her on the shoulder. She must not have been expecting to run into anyone in that deserted desert city, because she jumped at my touch and dropped her water pot on the ground. The clay pot smashed into pieces and the water quickly soaked into the brown, dusty ground.

She turned and glared at me with a pair of deep blue eyes. These were the deepest, bluest eyes. Blue like a freshwater pool I could fall into and swim in forever. For the second time in my life, I felt magic.

She didn't seem to be under the same spell as me. "Look what you've done," she snapped. Her voice was like a bell, each syllable a clear and perfect note.

"Um, er, uh" I stammered, desperately grasping for something to say. Something clever. Something witty. Something poetic. "Erk," I managed.

"Maddog and Raheem will never let me have any more," she sobbed.

Maddog? Raheem? The sound of my old foes' names jerked me back to reality.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"My water," she said. "It's all gone. It will be a week before I can get any more water from those vipers."

"No more water for a week?" I asked. "How can that be, there's plenty of water at the town fountain."

"There is no water in the town fountain," she said. "Maddog and Raheem have all the water."

"How can they have all the water?" I asked.

She looked at me with a bemused expression on her face. "You're not from around here, are you?" she asked. Then her hard features softened into a smile. A soft gentle smile. A smile that wrapped around me like a summer breeze.

"Ahhm," was all I could manage in reply. She held out her hand to me.

"My name's Barbara," she said. When she said it, it sounded like the chime of a perfect chord from an angel's harp.

I took her hand and shook it gently. "I'm -- ack -- erk -- um," was all I could say. Finally I blurted out my name and invited her to our booth. "I have some water there to replace what you've spilled." She smiled again, and, still holding her hand gently in mine, I led her back towards the market.

Along the way Barbara explained to me what had happened. I already knew that for years Maddog and Raheem had been buying up all of the oases

and aqueducts around town. What I didn't know was that six months earlier the town fountain had dried up. Nobody knew why or how, but now Maddog and Raheem controlled the water supply for the whole town. Now everyone had to work for Maddog and Raheem if they wanted any water at all. There was no one in the streets or at the market, because everyone was working for those two wily Samaritans in their salt quarries. It was horrible.

When we arrived at the market, Izzy, Hugh-Joe and Sahim had set up our stall and surrounded it with furniture. As we drew closer, they slipped behind and under the booth, blending with their surroundings like a trio of chameleons.

"Hey," I shouted. "No hiding, we've got some work to do." The Elvess reappeared, as if from nowhere. I introduced them to Barbara and repeated what she had told me. Hugh-Joe had listened carefully and then spoke. "That can't be right," he remarked. "If the fountain has dried up, all of the other wells and oases should have dried up, too."

Barbara looked at him quizzically. "But they haven't," she said. "Maddog and Raheem have more water than ever."

"Something funny is going on here," said Hugh-Joe, and he marched purposefully towards the town fountain at the other end of the market place.

When we arrived there, we could see that it was as dry as the surrounding desert air. Hugh-Joe got down on his hands and knees and inspected it. He brushed away some sand at the base. "What's this?" he asked, to no one in particular. He brushed away some more sand, exposing a gleaming copper pipe. Hugh-Joe stepped back.

"This shouldn't be here," he said.

"What is it?" asked Izzy.

Hugh-Joe explained, "this fountain is pretty old. I mean, look at all of this rust. But this pipe," he kicked at the shiny pipe he had uncovered, "this pipe is brand new. Somebody has put it here fairly recently, probably in the last six months or so. I think someone is draining the fountain through this pipe."

"But who would do such a thing?" asked Izzy.

"Oh, I think I have an idea," I said. I explained to the Elvess about my earlier encounter with Maddog and Raheem and their unproven reputation for shady dealing. "These scoundrels are trying to own all of the water. But that is just wrong. You can't own all the water anymore than you can own all of the air in the sky or the dirt in the ground."

"We have to do something," said Izzy.

Sahim crossed his arms. "What do you propose to do about it," he asked.

"We're going to get that water back," I said.

Sahim cringed. "I was afraid you were going to say that," he grumbled.

## **JUST DESERTS**

WE FOLLOWED THE PIPE TO A BIG WAREHOUSE at the edge of town. It was an enormous gray stone building. Above the enormous gray stone doors were the words "M & R Waterworks" engraved in old Samarian. "This must be the place," I said.

There was no guard there, probably because no guard was needed. The doors were solid rock and didn't budge no matter how hard we pushed, pulled or kicked at them. There were no windows to climb through. The walls themselves were impenetrable; they were built of massive granite bricks, each of which weighed more than a ton. There was no way in.

We stood at one corner, debating solutions to the problem. Hugh-Joe suggested that he could build some sort of a battering ram, but we didn't have the manpower to operate it. Izzy proposed digging under the walls, but when we tried this, we found the ground itself was solid stone and none of us could dent it. Sahim for the most part sat back and didn't say much, except to remind us from time to time that it was impossible.

"Nothing's impossible," I retorted. Then I looked up to the roof of the warehouse and noticed the brick chimney for the first time. "There's our way in," I shouted. Barbara told me later that my eyes were twinkling when I said it.

Maddog and Raheem had never figured anyone could climb onto the roof and slip down the chimney. The walls were sheer and could not be scaled. Ladders had yet to be invented. However, they never counted on a team of flying camels. I climbed back into the sled and in a minute was on top of the roof and down the chimney. Now, I've gone down quite a few chimneys in my day, but this one was my first.

Izzy, Hugh-Joe, Sahim, Barbara and I stepped out of the chimney and into a room filled with rows of enormous tanks. A shiny copper pipe extended from the base of every tank down through the floor. A film of condensed water vapour dripped down the side of each tank. It was awful. In Bethlehem, nobody had enough to drink, but there was so much water in this big room that it was running onto the floor.

Suddenly, a loud voice rang out. "Who's there?" it shouted. Then Maddog and Raheem stepped out from behind one of the tanks. Maddog grinned when he saw me.

"Oh, it's just you, toy man," he sneered. "Well, we've run you out of town before, we'll do it again." With that, he began to whirl the sling at his side.

Now, a sling may not sound like much of a weapon, but this was before anyone had rocket launchers or anti-matter ray guns. A stone thrown from the sling of a talented slinger could kill a man. And Maddog certainly knew like he knew what he was doing.

I spun around. Barbara was beside me, but the three Elvess had disappeared. I gripped her hand tightly, wondering where they had gone and waiting for the fatal stone to strike. Fortunately for me, Maddog hadn't noticed the disappearance of the Elvess. Just as he was about to cast his stone, a small arm appeared from nowhere, swinging a big stick. It only hit Maddog in the knees, but it was enough to send his throw awry and bring him tumbling to the ground.

Raheem looked around him in dismay. He had no idea what had happened, or where Maddog's attacker could be hiding. Just then, the same small arm swung the same big stick and Raheem, too fell to the floor. Sahim stepped from the shadows.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" he grumbled. "These two aren't going to lie here all day."

Izzy and Barbara quickly tied up the two Samaritans while Hugh-Joe and I examined the tanks. Once he understood how the system worked, it was a simple matter for Hugh-Joe to reverse the flow. In a few minutes the town fountain would be overflowing with water.

We crept back towards the chimney, but I couldn't resist turning back to leave something for Maddog and Raheem. I wrote a short note on a scrap of parchment and tucked it into Raheem's sock. I was sure he would find it there when he woke up.

It said "Big boys share their toys."

Once Maddog and Raheem's scheme was exposed, the townsfolk walked out of the salt quarries and chased the bad Samaritans out into the desert. I never heard what became of Maddog and Raheem, some people say they were swallowed up in a sandstorm. Others say they marched about the desert for forty years, looking in vain for a place that would take them in. Whatever became of them, they never bothered the good people of Bethlehem again.

Most important for me, within a week everyone was back to their usual lives. The market was bustling with activity, and we were able to sell all of our tables and chairs. Now we would be able to build the toys we needed to bring Christmas to the world.

On my last day in Bethlehem, I explained my plans to Barbara. She was so excited by the idea she asked if she could join us. Of course, I couldn't think of anything I'd like better and we welcomed her at once to our little desert toy shop.

We were married that winter, on Christmas Eve. For our honeymoon, I took her with me on my first around the world Christmas flight. We saw all of the capitals of Arabia and Europe. We had such a wonderful time I wished the journey would never end.

Some people have suggested that Mrs. Claus' real name is 'Mary Christmas'. As you can see, that's not the case, and anyway, it's pretty corny. Her name is Barbara, or Santa Barbara. Our daughter Santa Monica lives in California; she never wanted much to do with the family business.

There is one other thing you ought to know about Barbara. Just like me, she hasn't aged a bit from that day to this. I don't know why or how this could be so, but I have an idea. From the moment I met her she stole a piece of my soul. I think that piece has kept her alive forever. I hope it always will.

### **THREE IMPOSSIBLE THINGS**

DON'T THINK FOR A MINUTE that was the end of my troubles. There are still a lot of Raheems and Maddogs out there. They don't believe in Santa Claus and they don't think that you should either. You know the ones I mean. They are usually those big, funny looking kids who sit in the back of the school bus. Usually, you wouldn't take anything they might have to say seriously. If they told you the sky was blue, you wouldn't believe it. But for some reason, when these same kids tell you there is no such thing as Santa Claus, you believe it's so.

Well, I'm here to tell you that it isn't so. Those big kids in the back of the bus are wrong. And if you thought about it for two minutes, you'd know they were wrong, too. Let's look at their case against Santa Claus, and we'll see it doesn't amount to very much.

They usually start off by telling you that Santa Claus is just something your Mom or Dad made up. That one always makes me laugh. Do you think your Mom and Dad would really make up Santa Claus? These are the same people who wouldn't buy you that toy you wanted, or those new pants you like or those video games that every other kid in school has. You think those people

would make up a guy who gives you whatever you ask for? For free? I bet your Mom and Dad would be thrilled to know you think that much of them.

But you know better. Your Mom and Dad never get you what you really want. That's Santa's job.

The big kids say Santa Claus isn't real, because they've never seen him. Well, that's because that's the way I like it. I bet you've never seen air either, but you know that it's all around you. Just because you've never seen air, doesn't mean it isn't there.

The big kids on the school bus go on to say that Santa can't be real because he does impossible things. First, they say, he gets into houses and apartments that don't have chimneys, and when the houses do have chimneys, they are way too small for him.

Well, I don't always go down the chimney. Actually, I prefer to go in the front door. That's how I always used to do it. But when people started locking their doors all the time, I had to find other ways into their houses. You can usually slip through a back door or a window, but in a real pinch, a chimney will do. It's not as tight a fit as you might think.

"Oh yeah?" say the kids on the bus. "But he could never carry all those toys in one bag. That's impossible."

Of course, I don't use just one bag. I have a sled full of them. When I empty it, I just go on to the next one. If I run out of toys, I just go home and get some more. Don't let anybody tell you there isn't room at the North Pole for toys for all the kids in the world.

Then the kids in the bus bring out the big one. "How does Santa Claus get all the way around the world in one night?" they say. "Now that's impossible."

But we know that isn't right either. Astronauts in space go around the whole world in an hour and a half, and they don't even break a sweat. Santa Claus can do it, too. I mean, I've done it enough times, I ought to know.

There are a couple of little secrets I'll let you in on. First, I cheat. I don't do it in just one twelve hour night. While I'm going around the world, I keep crossing time zones. Twenty four of them in fact. I start my trip around four or five in the evening, and get back home around nine in the morning. Along the way, I cross 24 time zones, so I'm really out for one long 40 hour night. Long enough for an astronaut to get around the world 25 times. More than enough time for Santa Claus.

But the real trick, the thing that really makes it possible is that I do it on Christmas Eve. You see, minutes and hours don't always pass the same. You know what I mean; sometimes a morning will pass in a minute, and you'll find yourself on your way to lunch wondering where all that time went. And sometimes you'll find yourself stuck in the middle of a drowsy Sunday afternoon that just seems to stretch on forever. Forget what you think you know about physics, some days and nights are just longer than others and Christmas Eve is pretty much the longest of them all. I mean, ask any child you know, "what's the longest night of the year?" and they'll tell you "Christmas Eve," every time.

It isn't just perception, or how we look at things. If enough people believe in something, they can make it as real as the nose on your face. It's just the same with time. When enough people think that the day has slowed down or gone too fast, it's usually because it has. With all those kids out there waiting for Christmas to come, all those kids out there feeling the day and the night dragging on into eternity, I find there is plenty of time to get around the world.

So that's how it's done. Three impossible things every Christmas. Next time those kids on your bus tell you it can't be done, you just tell them it can. Santa Claus says so.

## **POLAR LEASE**

ABOUT THE ONLY THING LEFT to explain is how we got to the North Pole. It wasn't for quite a long time afterwards. We lived in the desert for a thousand years or so. All year long we built toys. Most every year we expanded the workshop and more of the Elvess joined us. Soon we had a real tent city dedicated to making toys.

You may have heard about the "Millennium Bug"; it's a programming defect that some people think will cause all of the world's computers to shut down at the beginning of the year 2000. Pretty much the same thing happened a thousand years ago, as the last millennium was coming to an end. A group of soothsayers predicted that at the end of the millennium, the world would be overcome by a deluge of frogs, swarms of bats and a plague of locusts. This impending disaster came to be known as the "Millennium Bugs".

Now, I never held much stock in soothsayers, but a lot of people in our part of the world were really worried about it. It got to the point where we couldn't get any work done. I mean, every time somebody spotted a frog or a grasshopper, there would be a huge hue and cry and everybody would run for cover. Christmas wasn't going to happen unless we made some changes.

I had wanted to make some changes for some time anyway. We needed more space and we needed a more central location. It was getting harder and harder to get around the world from this part of the globe. Besides, after a thousand years in the desert, you can really stand to get away from the heat.

Barbara and I decided that the best place to go was the North Pole. It was a lot cooler, and much more centrally located. Most important, there wouldn't be a frog or a locust within a thousand miles.

We sold our considerable spread in the desert to some land speculators. It turned out that black gunk that kept coming out of the ground every time we tried to drill a new water well was oil. In fact, our original toy factory was on one of the richest oil reserves in the Middle East. The oil royalties we collected on that deal kept our toy business going for centuries.<sup>6</sup>

It took us quite a while to get moved up to the North Pole, but it turned out to be the best move we could have made. Yes, it is cold here, and we don't

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<sup>6</sup> People often ask me how I can afford to make and give away toys like I do. Well, this was only the first of several financial ventures that worked out very well for me. Currently the licensing fees I collect from marketing my image to department stores and the Coca Cola Company more than cover the costs of running the entire operation. In fact, if the truth were told, I am one of the richest men in the world. Just don't tell anyone; if my wealth were more widely known, there would be no end of salesmen we would find knocking on our door, even at the North Pole.

even see the sun at all for about half of the year. But the terrible winters just make the summers seem that much more pleasant. In the summer the sun doesn't go down at all, and you can go outside without a hat for almost 20 minutes at a time.

The best part about our Arctic base is the privacy. For years and years no one ever came here at all. Sure, there was that business in 1909 when Peary and Henson arrived at the North Pole on their dog sleds and found a little toy factory. You should have seen the look on their faces. They were so disappointed that I agreed to let them go down in history as the men who "discovered" the North Pole, as long as they promised not to tell anyone what they found there. It was an arrangement that worked well for all of us.

Since then we've had the occasional explorer or documentary film maker knocking at our door. Once we even had a cross country skier from Alaska who had become terribly, terribly lost. But these visits are very rare. When we get company, we just bring them in, give them some hot chocolate and a toy train for the kids and send them back on their way.

The only thing we couldn't keep at the North Pole were all of the camels. They just couldn't stand the cold. So we let them go. They are probably still flying about here and there. Everyone once in a while I read about a UFO sighting and figure it's probably one of old Rude Ulf's descendants, just out for an evening stumble.

We tried to train some of the local animals to pull the sled, but the polar bears weren't too interested and the walruses, though they really tried hard, were just too slow. Finally we came across some caribou that seemed to have strayed from their flock. They were a lot smarter than camels and aren't nearly as clumsy, so it took quite a while to teach them how to fall over without falling down, but eventually they got the hang of it. So now I use reindeer instead of camels. The only real difference is that we have to stop for water a little more often.

Our toy factory has changed quite a bit, too. A big tent just wouldn't do up here. We've got rows of little brick buildings dedicated to making toys. Some for dolls, some for trains; but not as many as before. More and more of our workshops are devoted to making video games and skateboards.

Right on the North Pole itself we've built a 24-story office tower. That's where we keep all of the computers we need to handle and sort our mail and maintain our naughty and nice database. My office is right at the top. If you ever come by, just take the south entrance<sup>7</sup> and use the private elevator to get to my floor. Don't bother to knock, I'm usually in. But, I'll warn you, the place is usually a mess. I'm always behind on my correspondence, and typing up this little journal of my life and times has me even farther behind than usual.

So, that's my story. Why I do what I do and how I got to where I am. I've been picking away at it for a few months now, trying to make sure I got it straight and that I managed to fit all the important bits in.

I promised Iggy I'd get this story finished by Christmas, and here it is, Christmas Eve. I couldn't tell you anymore, even if I had any more to say. The reindeer are hitched up and ready to go. I can hear the sleigh bells ringing. I've really got to get on my way. I have three impossible things to do before morning.

MERRY CHRISTMAS

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<sup>7</sup>Some people get confused when I give them these directions. Because the big tower is located right on the North Pole, every entrance on the building is the south entrance. What I really mean is the entrance which is south of the main entrance. Not the south one, but the other one. Oh never mind, when you get here, just ask for me, everyone here knows me.