

Maggot, Lice and Worm

A Buggy Ride

THE BIT THAT GOES BEFORE THE BEGINNING OF THE STORY

GREY RAIN FELL FROM A GREY SKY. It hardly ever rained at the North Pole. In fact, none of the people at the graveside could ever remember it raining before.

Usually it snowed at the North Pole. Indeed, hardly a day passed when it did not snow. Snow was a way of life at the North Pole. Sometimes it fell in big soft fluffy flakes; more often in tiny specks, driven by a ferocious northern wind.

Daily snowfall is just one of the reasons why there are no trees at the North Pole. That, and the fact that it is perpetual winter there and that the North Pole is just an ice cap, with no dirt at all underneath it. Indeed, one would have thought it impossible for there to be trees of any kind at the North Pole. And there were none. Not any. Not a single one.

Well, there was one tree. But only one. Nobody knew what manner of tree it was, or how it had ever grown at all, but then, impossible things have been known to happen at the North Pole from time to time. It was the big twisted fir tree where three little elves, Iggy, Yugo and Sam had built their tree house. Yugo had designed it, of course. He had a knack for that sort of thing. Always building things. Sometimes they worked, sometimes they didn't, but most often they worked in surprising and unintended ways.

But now the little tree house stood empty, its tire swing turning slowly in the afternoon breeze. Nobody swung there this gray day, and it was doubtful that anyone ever would again.

At the graveside stood three rows of little people. Elves, their heads all respectfully bowed. Each saying a silent good bye to their old friends, Iggy, Yugo and Sam.

Santa Claus himself stood at the head of the little graves, intoning a prayer as each of the three tiny caskets were lowered into the cold and frozen ground. "We'll not see their kind again," he said, his usual rich baritone muted to a raspy whisper. "They are in a better place now. But let none of us ever forget their tremendous sacrifice."

The elves at the graveside all nodded solemnly. They knew too well what had happened. How Iggy, Yugo and Sam had given their lives to save them. To save Christmas.

Santa finished his sermon. He looked up and nodded gravely. Then he started to laugh.

THE BIT THAT ACTUALLY IS THE BEGINNING OF THE STORY

IT STARTED, AS MANY A GRIM TALE DOES, about a month earlier in a prison cell in northern Manitoba.

Actually, not that many stories, grim or otherwise, begin in a prison cell in northern Manitoba, but this one does.

There were in that cell, as there often is in a prison, too many prisoners, none of whom was up to any good at all. This is to be expected, since if the occupants of this prison cell had made it a practice to be up to any good, or even some good, they probably would not have been in this northern Manitoba prison cell in the first place. But bad they were, in prison they were, and it is here that our story begins.

There were three of them there, in a six foot by nine-foot room that was built for two. The biggest was Maggot. Maggot was bigger by half than the other two put together. His real name was Jim, but everyone called him Maggot. He liked the sound of it. He thought it made him sound tough. He didn't realize that maggots were actually little harmless grubs that would someday grow up to be little harmless flies, but then

Maggot had not become what he was because he was blessed with an over abundance of I.Q. points. Maggot had reached this point in his career largely because of his size. Simply put, he was a lot bigger and stronger than just about anybody.

Because he was the biggest of the three in the cell, he had the bottom bunk. There were two good reasons for this. First, the bottom bunk was cooler at night, so everyone wanted it and because Maggot was the biggest, he got to have it. The other, and perhaps more important, reason was because Maggot *was the biggest*. He was so large that one had to be pretty comfortable with the idea of suicide to sleep in the bunk underneath him.

Maggot sat on his bunk now, it's brown metal rails bending beneath his considerable bulk, listening to Lice boast about the crimes he was going to commit when he got out of prison.

Lice was a scrawny, wiry man with only three of his original teeth. When he spoke, he curled his thin red lips over them so that nobody could see the sorry state of his dentition. His long narrow nose was set between his small, closely set eyes¹ and rose steeply to his crudely shaved head. His head was shaved because, well, he had lice. Lice slept on the top bunk, but now he sat on the stainless steel toilet bowl in the corner. He wasn't using the toilet, he was just sitting on it, since there was no chair in the room, and the alternative was to sit on the floor, where Worm was sitting now.

Unlike the names of his companions, "Worm" wasn't a nickname. It was actually the name his mother had given him, about ten minutes before she left him in a garbage dumpster. Worm's life had generally progressed badly from there.

Worm always sat on the floor. He was used to it. He was the smallest of the three and since there were only two beds in the cell, he slept on the floor, too. After two years in this cell, almost all of which was spent sleeping on the floor or sitting on it, it really made no difference to him. He sat there, day upon day, staring through the bars of his little cell and thinking. Worm was neither as big, nor as strong as the other two. Thinking was what he did best.²

¹It's true. Just like the stereotype of the criminal class, Lice had beady eyes.

² Actually, if you knew some of the awful things he thought about, you would probably say that thinking was what Worm did worst.

A short digression about prisons: The reason there are prisons is to prevent crime. In one respect, prisons are hugely successful in achieving this goal. This is because of the simple and self-evident fact that so long as the prisoners are *inside* them, they can not very well be outside committing crimes.

If we could only keep the prisoners inside the prisons forever, there probably would not be any crime at all. Unfortunately, almost every prison sentence comes to an end eventually and the prisoners are released, usually to commit more, and more heinous, crimes than the ones for which they were imprisoned in the first place.

For this reason, penitentiaries also have the noble purpose of teaching their residents the painful lesson that crime does not pay, such that they emerge from these institutions changed and better people.

However, in this respect, the prison system is an abject³ and utter failure, largely for the simple and self evident reason that, for the most part, crime *does* pay, and its practitioners usually can not wait to get outside of the concrete walls that imprison them to commit more crimes.

So, it came to be that the inmates of this prison, and these three inmates in particular, spent most of their time discussing ever bigger, bolder and more inventive crimes they planned to commit once released. Almost every day they took turns regaling the others with stories of the ill-gotten riches that awaited them upon their release.

It is at this point that we complete our brief digression about the penal system and join their conversation, which has already started without us.

Lice continued, "once I get out of this joint, the world is gonna see crime like there never was crime before. I got plans that you wouldn't believe. Believe me."

"Is that right?" said Maggot. "Just what are these unbelievable plans?"

"Well," said Lice, smacking his thin red lips together. "I'm plannin' the biggest bit of stealin' you ever heard of. You see, there's this big house in the city where I grew up. And I heard the owner has a safe in

³Have you ever noticed that the only words you ever see the word "abject" in front of are "failure" and "poverty"? You never hear anyone speak of an abject house, or an abject street or an abject anything else but failure or poverty. Why is that?

the bedroom filled with jewels and gold bars. And I also heard that he's got another safe in his dining room that's filled with even more jewels and gold bars. But the best part, and this is the part you won't believe, I heard that he's got an even bigger safe yet in the bathroom, of all places, where he keeps all of the best jewels and all of the biggest gold bars.

"When I get out of here, I'm headin' straight there and takin' all of it. I'll be the richest and most famous thief there ever was."⁴

"Hmmm," said Maggot. "That sounds like a fine crime, but it don't sound like no crime I never heard of before. In fact, it sounds like a pretty plain old crime to me."

Lice pursed his thin lips, disappointed that his plans failed to impress the big man. "So what kind of crime have you got planned?" he asked.

Maggot cleared his throat and spat a thick green wad towards the corner of the cell. It struck the wall and slid down slowly, where it joined a fetid puddle of thick green wads past.

"The way I see it," he said, "there's a lot of people who are responsible for puttin' me here, and keepin' me here."⁵ There's that cop, and that judge and my rotten lawyer."

Lice laughed at this. He had a rotten lawyer, too.

"But most of all, there's the warden. And when I get out, I mean to get even with the lot of them." He smashed his fist into his palm with a loud beefy smack. "I mean to inflict a little punishment on all of 'em." Maggot went on to outline a scheme of such ferocity and violence it is scarcely suitable reading. Suffice it to say that it involved three big old sewer rats, a rusty chainsaw, a railroad spike, duct tape and an old Plymouth Fury automobile.

Lice laughed even louder than before as Maggot detailed his murderous plans for revenge. Lice had a thin gravelly laugh that might have been a sign that he had something loose in one or both of his lungs. "Now that would be somethin'," he said.

⁴ Lice is none too bright. Generally speaking, famous (and infamous: for some reason they mean the same thing) thieves are pretty easy to catch. He would be much better off being the richest and *least* famous thief in the world. Then, at least, he could enjoy his wealth for a while.

⁵ Like most people in his situation, Maggot did not include *himself* as one of the people responsible for his current residence in one of Her Majesty's jails.

"That's nothin'", said Worm.

The other two turned to look at him. They usually forgot Worm was even in the room with them. He never said much; mostly he just sat on the floor staring out between the bars at the end of the room. He never joined in their conversations about new and greater crimes. He just sat there, staring out between the bars and thinking. But today, for the first time either one of his companions could remember, he spoke.

"That's nothin' at all," repeated Worm.

"How you figure?" demanded Maggot, a little incensed that this quiet little man was belittling his carefully considered plans for revenge.

"You wanna commit a real crime? The kind that people write books about and make movies of the week about?" asked Worm.

Lice nodded, the corner of his mouth turning up slightly. "What do you suggest?" he asked.

Worm leaned back against the cold concrete wall. It felt familiar against his back. "You wanna be famous, it's not enough to do some big crime. The world has seen plenty of stealin' and robbin' and killin'. People have seen so much of that stuff, that they ain't even shocked about it anymore. They just watch the news and shake their heads and then they forget about it, 'cause the next day somethin' even worse happens.

"If you wanna be the greatest criminal ever, you gotta do some new original sin. A crime so big, and so bad, no one has even thought of it before."

"And I suppose you know about such a crime?" sneered Lice.

"I s'pose I do," answered Worm. "I s'pose I do."

"Well, then," said Maggot. "Spit it out. What is this crime?"

Worm stood up slowly, flexing his stiff knees as he rose. His joints were always a little stiff. Sleeping on a slab of cement can do that to a man. He stepped over to the bars and wrapped his spidery fingers around one of them. "What I say is the greatest crime is killin' a man no one would ever dream of killin'. Killin' a man they say can't be killed. Now that would be somethin'"

Maggot chuckled deeply. "I guess that would be somethin' to kill a man that can't be killed. But I never heard of such a man."

"Sure you have," said Worm. "Everyone's heard of Santa Claus, ain't they?"

THE BIT WHERE THE STORY CHANGES PERSPECTIVE

DECEMBER AT THE NORTH POLE. It should be the nastiest time of year at one of the nastiest places on Earth, but, surprisingly, that was not the case this year. In fact, it was never the case. Although it was dark, windy and bitterly, bitterly cold, everyone who lived and worked at that forbidden place was in warm spirits.

This was because it was December, and it was the North Pole, and December was always the busiest and happiest time of the year there. The elves were hard at work, finishing the toys and readying the sled for Santa Claus' annual midnight journey.

Among the many elves at work that day, completing some wiring on the remote control car assembly line were Iggy, Yugo and Sam.

Wiring remote control cars is a fairly tricky business and while Yugo seemed to relish in the task, both Iggy and Sam were falling behind in their work.

"Man, I can't wait to get out of here," sighed Sam. He stretched out his arms and cracked his knuckles to ease the stiffness in his fingers. "Why don't kids want little wooden cars for Christmas anymore?"

Iggy smiled and connected a yellow wire to a tiny engine. "Come on, Sam," he said. "You know these cars are way more fun to play with than old wooden cars."

"Yeah," added Yugo. "Especially these ones. I designed them myself. I've added a few modifications."

Iggy set his black handled pliers down on the workbench and turned to face Yugo. "You made some modifications?" he asked.

"What kind of modifications?" joined Sam, glaring in Yugo's direction. Sam was only too familiar with Yugo's modifications. Many of

the modified toys Yugo had designed in the past had some unfortunate defects. Like the "Tickle Me Jabba" doll: when it was poked in the belly, it laughed and it jiggled and then it blew up.

"Oh, nothing too special," Yugo replied. He spun a final screw into place on the car in his hand and set it down. "Here, let me show you," he said.

He picked up the remote control and flipped the switch on. The car's headlights turned on and the engines came to life with a surprisingly loud rumble. Yugo jammed the accelerator switch forward and the car dashed ahead to the end of the workbench, far faster than any remote controlled car either of the other two elves had ever seen. Yugo twisted the little steering wheel and the car darted to the right and headed straight for the wall.

"Look out," shouted Iggy, "it's going to . . ."

Before Iggy could finish his warning, the car reached the wall and started to drive straight up it.

". . .crash" finished Iggy.

The car continued up the wall and then turned onto the ceiling. They looked up while Yugo turned the steering wheel left and right, steering around light fixtures, ceiling fans and a couple of hanging plants. The car reached the far wall and Yugo steered it down expertly, then back across the floor and up onto the table, where he brought it to a sudden stop, leaving a black skid mark in front of Sam's tools.

"Wow," said Iggy. "That is cool."

Yugo smiled widely. Even Sam seemed impressed.

Then the car blew up.

Perhaps nobody would have seen the short news story that appeared the next day on page B-17 of the *North Pole Times* anyway, because it was Christmastime and everyone was pretty busy. But, with most of the elves working overtime repairing the workshop and recalling over ten thousand exploding remote controlled racecars, it was certain nobody read it. It did not really matter, because afterwards, that news story was all anyone could talk about.

Three Escape Maximum Security Prison

Flin Flon (CP) -- George Blohaard, warden of the maximum-security federal penitentiary at Flin Flon, Manitoba, reported today that three prisoners escaped from custody last night. The three men, James Magorski, 37; Ivan Lickman, 34; and "Worm" Doe, 24 apparently escaped by using a metal pole fashioned from an awkward combination of plumbing parts to vault over the prison's concrete walls. Warden Blohaard commented that the walls of the penitentiary are over twenty feet high and are topped with a three-foot coil of barbed wire. "Each of these men now share the world record in the pole vault," the warden added proudly.

The prisoners each were serving multiple concurrent life sentences for what Warden Blohaard described as "gross crimes against humanity". Although a search of court records disclosed that prisoner Magorski was actually acquitted of a series of murders by reason of insanity, he was nonetheless imprisoned anyway because, in the words of his own defence lawyer "you just can't allow people like that outside in decent society".

The three men are described respectively as "hideously fat", "repulsive" and "so ugly he makes your eyes water". Prison officials warn that the three fugitives should be considered not only armed, but also legged, ill mannered and extremely dangerous. Warrants have been issued for their arrest and the public is cautioned not to approach any of the fugitives, not even with a twenty-foot pole. "After all," says Warden Blohaard, "that's how they got out of here in the first place."

In other local news, a train engine and three boxcars of high explosives were reported missing from the Flin Flon Train yard early this morning. Officials believe the theft is the work of some "punk kids" and remain optimistic that the explosives will be either found, or heard, soon.

THE BIT WHICH EXPLAINS WHAT THE VILLAINS ARE UP TO NOW

WE REJOIN MAGGOT, LICE AND WORM IN the cabin of an old locomotive steaming its way north along the old FFBI line, across a wooden trestle bridge that spanned the Arctic Ocean between Baffin Island and the mainland. It was really a wonder of modern engineering, and almost nobody knew it even existed.

In the early 1960's the Canadian government built a railroad track that runs north along the Hudson's Bay across the Arctic Ocean to the northern tip of Baffin Island. It was intended to be a make work project which would open up the north to tourism. Unfortunately, like almost all government programs, the FFBI (the Flin Flon - Baffin Island Railroad) was fundamentally flawed. First, there were virtually no people living in the area, so there were no unemployed workers available to actually build the line. As such, the government was forced to advertise for workers in other parts of the country where there really was no need for make work projects. Second, and perhaps more significantly, there was absolutely no interest among tourists in traveling, by train, to the northern tip of Baffin Island. This is because even in the middle of July, the snow on the northern part of Baffin Island is over your head and only a deranged masochist would ever want to go there. Because of the decided lack of deranged masochists queuing up outside travel agencies, the FFBI never really got off the ground, and, for the most part, people eventually forgot about it.

Maggot, Lice and Worm had never heard of the FFBI when they arrived at the train station after their prison break. They were only planning to spend the night there while they figured out what to do next. But since there was an unguarded locomotive on the track, and since it was hitched up to three boxcars full of dynamite, and since the track appeared to be headed north, their plans to travel to the North Pole and commit the ultimate crime, killing Santa Claus, which until then had been fairly ill-defined, suddenly crystallized into a malignant whole.

Now, two days and several hundred miles later, Maggot leaned back in the engineer's chair and adjusted his enormous belly. He shouted over his shoulder, "More coal!"

Behind him, Lice and Worm were soaked with sweat as they each shoveled coal into the big boiler of the old steam locomotive. Lice leaned against his shovel and hollered back, "if you want more coal on the fire, why don't you get your fat behind back here and give us a hand?"

The truth was, if Maggot went back to shovel coal into the boilers, there would be no room for either of the others, so it was better this way. But Maggot was not about to admit that he was too fat to help. He just laughed and shouted for the other two to lay on more coal.

They were two days out of Flin Flon and none of them had any idea how much further they had to go. But no one seemed to be following them and the train tracks were still going north, so they seemed to be well on track⁶ with their plans.

"So how are we gonna kill 'im?" asked Lice.

Worm sighed. They had been through the plan a hundred times, but it was clear that Lice was not the brains of the group. In fact, given the amount of coal he had poured into the boiler, it was also clear he was not the muscle, either. Nor, from their extended acquaintance, could Worm say that Lice provided any of the personality to their little group. In fact, as far as Worm could tell, his only contribution was his complete absence of any morals and a case of eye watering halitosis.

"Okay, it's like this," Worm explained. "In the back of this train are a couple of dozen tons of dynamite and other explosives. When we get to the North Pole, we pile all of this stuff into Santa's workshop, tie the old man on top and light the fuse."

"Yeah," giggled Lice, "then what?"

"Then we run away and wait for the fireworks. After the big boom, there is no Santa Claus, no Christmas and the three of us go down in history and the greatest criminals the world has ever known," finished Worm.

Lice laughed a little louder and threw a handful of coal into the boiler. Maggot laughed too, which was a little frightening to Worm, since when Maggot laughed the whole locomotive shook.

The Maggot leaned closer to the window. "Looks like we've reached the end of the line," he said.

Indeed they had. Up ahead was the tiny village of Goose Creek. This was an odd name for a place that featured neither geese, nor a creek. It had been built to support the train station at the end of the line and was thought to be the kind of quaint and rustic name that would

⁶ Yes, I did that on purpose.

bring tourists flocking to the north. In the end, neither tourists nor geese flocked to Goose Creek.

"Either of you know how to stop this thing?" asked Maggot.

Lice and Worm looked at each other, then at Maggot. "You're the one in the engineer's chair," said Worm. "It's your job to stop it."

Maggot had no answer for this, and began frantically searching the control panel for the word "brakes". Being completely illiterate, he eventually realized that this was a hopeless task and began frantically flipping switches and pushing buttons. The control panel emitted a variety of noises, but the train did not slow at all. If anything, it seemed it might be chugging along even faster.

"What do I do?" Maggot cried. Lice just kept grinning and giggling as the little train station began to fill up their view through the front window.

Worm reached up casually and gripped a black cable running along the ceiling of the cabin. He gave it a hard tug. There was a loud squeal and the train slid to a stop directly in front of the station.

The three villains climbed out of the cabin and stretched. After being so close to the boilers, they were shocked by how cold it was outside. None of them were dressed for this.

"Now what?" asked Maggot.

Worm looked around at the little village of Goose Creek, population 3. The village was made up of the train station, a partially finished hotel and two igloos. There was nothing else there. He walked along the platform. At the end of the station there was a small general store, and beside that a counter with a sign that read "Dog Sled Rental". Worm walked back to the locomotive, reached in and pulled out a crowbar. He gave it an experimental swing and then led the other two towards the general store.

"Gentlemen," he said, " let's see if these good people are open for business."

THE BIT THAT FILLS IN WHAT IS GOING ON AT THE NORTH POLE

"SUSPENDED FOR A WEEK, I can't believe it," said Iggy, kicking at the snow alongside the path that led to their tree house.

"Look, Ig, I said I was sorry," Yugo said sheepishly. "I never meant to get you guys in trouble."

Sam did not say anything. He knew the others were upset, but he just could not wipe the smile off of his face. Sure, Santa Claus was pretty upset after the explosion. He stormed into the workshop just as Iggy and Yugo finished putting out the fire. His face was almost as red as his jacket. His cheeks were rosy most of the time, but not like this. There was some hollering, Yugo's attempted explanation and then Santa Claus pointed to the door with his thick pink finger. "Out!" he yelled, and Iggy, Yugo and Sam slowly marched outside.

So now the three of them were suspended for a week, with pay. Sam could not believe the luck. A week off work, with pay, in December. It was unheard of. It was glorious.

But, for some reason he could not understand, the others seemed pretty upset about it, so he decided that it might be best if he did not say anything about how he really felt. He just nodded whenever the others spoke. But he still could not stop smiling.

"What are we going to do for a week," moaned Iggy. Sam had dozens of ideas, many of which involved in some way or another a big overstuffed easy chair, but he just kept nodding. He pulled his scarf up over his mouth to hide his grin.

The three elves had walked through the drifts that surrounded the North Pole for the better part of the afternoon. Now, they found themselves outside the little hangar where Yugo stored his snowmobile. Yugo led them inside.

"Come on guys, let's go for a ride," he said.

For the first time that afternoon, Sam stopped smiling. He hated going for rides in Yugo's snowmobile. Yugo's snowmobile was no ordinary snowmobile. It did not even look like a snowmobile. The passengers did not sit out in the open air; rather, they sat inside a fully enclosed and heated cabin. The ride was smooth, fast and comfortable. But Sam hated it.

It only resembled a snowmobile in one aspect; which were the two skis at the front. These were virtually new because they only used when the snowmobile was traveling on snow, which it rarely did. The snowmobile had big oversized black wheels so that it was equally at home on a paved road or the muddiest, rockiest terrain. It had wings, which extended from each side, which allowed it to fly. It could even travel underwater like a submarine.

Sam had been airborne, underwater and even into space in the snowmobile, but he still hated it. Something bad always happened to him whenever he went inside the thing. He could not remember a snowmobile ride that did not also involve a near death experience.

For this reason, Sam stopped smiling for the first time that afternoon.

Yugo walked over to a large shape in the hangar and pulled a blue tarpaulin from it. He pushed a button on a remote control attached to his key ring and the passenger door slid open slowly on its smooth hydraulics.

"Step inside guys," he said. "Since we've got nothing else to do, we might as well go for a ride. And I've made a few modifications that I've been meaning to show you for quite a while."

Now Sam was really depressed. He could think of hundreds of things he could be doing instead. Taking a nap was pretty high on the list.

But Iggy jumped in enthusiastically and patted the seat next to him, gesturing to Sam to join them.

"Actually guys," said Sam, "why don't you go on without me. I think I'll just head home and catch up on a few things." Catch up on his nap, is what he was thinking.

"Fine," said Yugo. "We'll drop you off."

Figuring he had no choice, Sam reluctantly climbed into the snowmobile and sat down, taking extra care to ensure that his seat belt was securely fastened and double latched.

Once they were all inside, Yugo pushed an orange flashing button and the three lithium fusion engines began to rumble gently. He pulled

on a black handle and then pressed gently on a pedal with his left foot. The snowmobile slowly eased forward and out onto the packed snow.

"I think we should blow some of the carbon out of the engines," said Yugo, and punched down on the pedal. The snowmobile lurched forward and accelerated. Soon everything outside became a white blur.⁷

"Here, let me show you some new stuff," said Yugo. He twisted on a blue knob and the snowmobile tipped onto its side, but continued racing forward without losing any speed. "How about this?" said Yugo, and he flipped a yellow toggle switch. The snowmobile righted itself and then launched straight up into the air. It was just like a high-speed freight elevator, but there was no building around them.

"I think I'm going to be sick," said Sam.

Yugo flipped the switch off. The snowmobile stopped and floated in the air, several hundred feet above the ground. Yugo turned the snowmobile slowly, and the three elves took in the panoramic view of the North Pole sweeping slowly across the view screen. Sure, it was mostly white in every direction they faced, but they could see an awful lot of it.

Yugo pressed a green button and the slow rotation stopped. "What's that?" he asked, pointing out his window.

"I don't see anything," said Iggy, straining to see where Yugo was pointing. Sam didn't say anything, because he was hiding his head under his arm.

"Over there," said Yugo. "Here, see if this helps." He punched a few letters on the keyboard in front of him and the view through the window zoomed closer. "I've installed a telephoto windshield," he said.

With the aid of the telephoto windshield, the speck Yugo had pointed to grew to a group of specks and was then easily identified as four men, no only three men, but one of them very big, and a sled piled high with something.

"Who do you suppose they are?" asked Iggy.

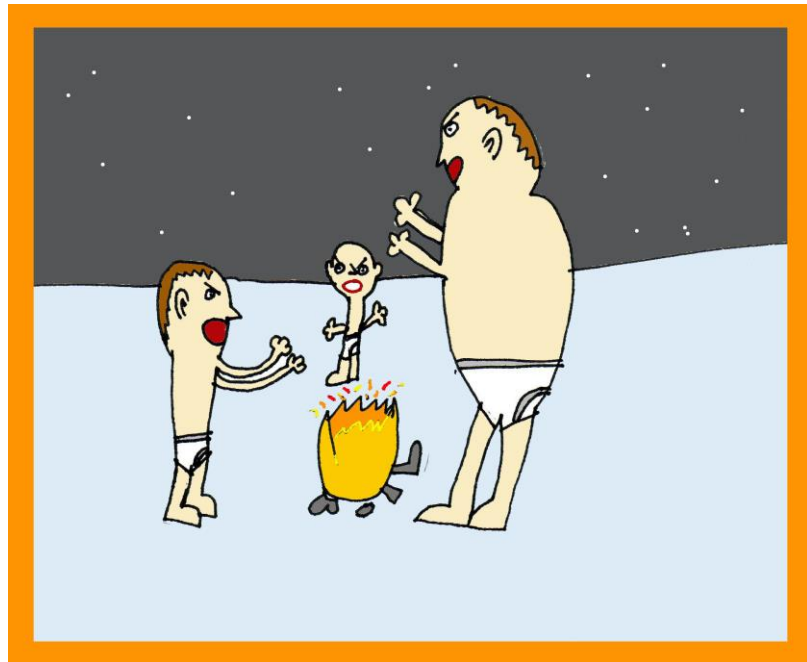
⁷Actually, in December with the wind blowing, everything at the North Pole is pretty much a white blur, even if one is standing perfectly still, so this does not necessarily mean the three elves were going very fast at all. But take it from me, and Sam's stomach, the snowmobile was really moving.

"Who knows?" answered Yugo. "Hardly anyone comes this way. They might be explorers or walrus hunters, I suppose. But I bet they're just three guys who are really, really lost. Let's find out."

He flipped the yellow toggle switch and the snowmobile dropped back down to the ground. Once they had landed safely, Yugo pressed down on the accelerator once more and guided them towards the peculiar travelers they had just seen.

THE BIT THAT HAPPENED NEXT

IT WAS A PITIFULLY SMALL FIRE, but it was better than no fire at all. Maggot, Lice and Worm had just discovered the obvious fact that there are no trees at the North Pole, and therefore there is no firewood there at all. But they had to do something to keep warm, so they had set fire to their mittens. These ignited and burned to nothing in almost no time at all, so they quickly added their wool caps to the embers, then their boots, socks and finally their overcoats. By the time Iggy, Yugo and Sam had reached the edge of the little camp, Maggot, Lice and Worm were dressed only in their long underwear and were huddled around the remaining embers, shivering and swearing at each other.



Yugo had parked the snowmobile behind a large boulder at the edge of the criminal's camp and the elves had crept quietly to the corner of the boulder where they peered out nervously at this strange and shivering group.

"Do you suppose they need help?" asked Iggy.

"Look at those losers," said Yugo. "If we don't do something soon, they'll freeze to death trying to get warm."

"I don't know," said Sam. "They look pretty dangerous to me." Sam saw danger lurking around every corner, inside every closet, and under most beds. He did not see any danger under his own bed, but only because he had cut off the bed legs so that his mattress lay directly, and safely, on the floor. Sam considered his clinical paranoia to be nothing more than an enhanced survival instinct, and no one could really argue with that, since he had not died. Not yet, anyway.

Iggy chided him gently. "Oh Sam. These gentlemen are obviously in trouble. We've got to do something for them."

"How come?" demanded Sam. "We don't even know what they're doing here. They might be escaped criminals on a mission to blow up the North Pole, for all we know."

"Sam, you're just being paranoid again,"⁸ said Iggy. But before he could step out from behind the boulder and introduce himself, Lice's thin reedy voice piped out from the camp.

"So how are we gonna kill 'im?" he asked. Iggy stopped at the edge of the boulder and listened.

Worm sighed. "Here we go again," he thought. "Look," he said to Lice. "I've explained it all to you a hundred times. This is the last time I am going to tell you." And he outlined his plan, for the one hundred and first time.

Worm did not leave out any of the details. He included the parts about the dynamite on the dog sled, the bit about putting it all in Santa Claus' workshop, the section where they tied Santa Claus to the top of the heap and the part about blowing the North Pole, and Santa Claus himself, to smithereens and beyond.

"Have you got it now?" he asked Lice crossly.

Lice nodded dopyly. He did not get it, and probably never would. He just knew they were on a grand and glorious mission, that Worm was going to make him famous and that he could not feel his feet anymore.

⁸ Paranoia is not always a bad thing. Just because you are paranoid, like Sam, does not mean that the strangers you meet are not criminally insane maniacs who are out to destroy everything you love. Sometimes they are.

But Iggy, Yugo and Sam got it. They understood the plan the very first time. Now they stood behind the boulder, with pale and frightened expressions on their faces.

Except for Sam, he had a pale, frightened, yet somehow satisfied expression on his face. He wanted to say "toldyaso", but he was afraid of making any noise at all, lest the criminals decide to begin their North Pole crime spree by disemboweling him. ⁹

Yugo whispered urgently to Iggy. "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know," said Iggy. "But we can't let them do it."

"But what can we do?" replied Yugo.

Iggy looked around the boulder. "I think I have a plan," he said.

Sam had already thought of a plan. It began with running away. Very fast. Beyond that the details were sketchy, but he was sure he would be able to work them out during the first, critical, running away phase of his plan.

But Iggy spoke first and outlined his plan. "They can't pull it off without all that dynamite," he whispered, pointing to the big heap piled on the back of the dog sled. "All we have to do is blow up the dynamite here and that will be the end of it. If you two can distract them, I'll sneak over to their fire, throw one of their logs, or whatever, on the sled and then run back here before the whole works explodes.

Sam did not like Iggy's plan at all. Well, he liked the part near the end where Iggy ran away, he just felt that this part should be moved up to the front of the plan and that the rest of the plan should be abandoned altogether. But Yugo thought it was a swell plan, and Sam lost the vote 2-1, even after he demanded a recount.

THE BIT ABOUT IGGY'S IGNOBLE END

IGGY SLITHERED THROUGH THE SNOW like a snake. Well, maybe not like a snake, I can't be sure, because I've never seen a snake slither through snow. In fact, I doubt a snake could slither through snow, what with being cold blooded and all. It would probably just lie there, frozen

⁹You see, sometimes paranoia can be a good thing.

stiff, looking more like a twig than a snake. So I guess it would be more accurate, though less descriptive, to say that Iggy slithered through the snow like an elf. But if a snake *could* slither through snow, it would probably look a lot like Iggy did now.

Iggy slithered through the snow like an elf. He moved quietly, and almost invisibly, toward the three bandits and their little campfire.

Suddenly, from behind the boulder, a bird called. Maggot, Lice and Worm all turned towards the sound. They strained to see something through the dark December night.¹⁰

The bird called again. Maggot, Lice and Worm could not stand it anymore. If there was a bird over there, they could catch it and they could eat it and maybe then they would not be so cold. They each stood up and walked quickly towards the boulder.

There was no bird, of course. It was just Sam, making a noise like a chicken. A few paces behind him, Yugo quietly opened the door of the snowmobile, so he could ready it for their getaway. Sam had wanted to do this part of the plan, since it was the part most closely associated with the word "getaway", but he had to agree with the others that he knew best how to act like a chicken. He clucked again, and now Maggot, Lice and Worm were jogging towards the boulder.

"Hurry up," hissed Sam between clucks.

As the three villains scurried towards the boulder, Iggy made his move. He scrambled to his feet and sprinted towards the fire. It really was not much of a fire, just the smoldering treads of Maggot's boots. Iggy picked up the little piece and waved it in the air. It glowed brightly and a small flame started to chew up the end of the tread.

"I think this will do," Iggy murmured and crept over to the dog sled.

On the other side of the fire, Lice and Worm had reached the boulder. Maggot was a good ten paces behind them, and was already slowing down to catch his breath. Worm and Lice stopped in front of the boulder. Worm walked carefully to the right corner and gestured to Lice to go left. Just as they were about to round the boulder and seize the delicious sounding bird on the other side, they heard a dog bark.

¹⁰ It was actually about 4 o'clock in the afternoon, but it seemed like night, since the sun had gone down in October and had not risen yet. Another reason why there are absolutely no trees at the North Pole

Iggy had loosened the hitch on the dog sled and shoed the six tired dogs away. "Run," he commanded softly, "run away fast." The dogs obviously sensed what was to happen next, and bolted across the drifting snow. Iggy raised the remains of the burning shoe with his right hand and threw it up on top of the sled. He turned and hurried toward the safety of the boulder and Yugo's snowmobile.

Worm watched the little fire lick at the tarpaulin covering his beautiful pile of dynamite. "No!" he yelled. But he knew it was hopeless. The fire sparked and grew. He only had a second, and he used it to throw himself to the ground behind the boulder. On the other side, Lice rounded the boulder, expecting to find a nice fat rooster.

Iggy passed the campfire and glanced back over his shoulder. The tarpaulin was burning quickly now, more quickly than he expected. He only had a few moments to get away. He hoped it would be enough.

He reached inside himself, looking for a little more speed. He seemed to find some, because he began running faster. He looked back in front of him. It was not much farther. He took another stride and . . .

. . . ran right into Maggot. He bounced off the obese felon and landed on his back in the snow. He sat up and Maggot's giant hand grabbed his shoulder. Maggot pulled Iggy up into the air and spun around to shout at Worm. "Hey Worm," he growled, holding Iggy out in front of him, "Look what I fou . . ."

At that moment the heap of dynamite exploded, shattering the brittle night air with a tremendous **BOOM**.

Pieces of Maggot splashed against the boulder and rained down on the other side. Worm was knocked down by a foot that was not attached to anybody's leg anymore. Lice tripped over a great slab of blubber that fell from the sky. He pushed himself up and felt something soft brush past his cheek. A red velvet toque fell softly at his feet.

Sam stared at the hat in horror. It was Iggy's hat, that was clear. But where was Iggy?

Yugo shouted at Sam from the snowmobile. "Come on, we've got to get out of here!"

Sam picked up the hat and pressed it against his cheek. "But what about Iggy?" he asked.

"Nobody on the other side of that rock could have survived that explosion," Yugo said. "Nobody. Not even Iggy. Now let's get out of here!"

Sam dropped the toque and ran towards the snowmobile.

THE BIT CONCERNING YUGO'S GRUESOME DOOM

YUGO SLIPPED THE SNOWMOBILE into first gear. "Hurry up," he shouted to Sam.

Sam took a few more steps towards the snowmobile. Much as he hated the awful thing, for once it looked to be a lot safer inside the snowmobile than outside of it. Moreover, there did not appear to be any body parts inside the snowmobile, whereas outside the snowmobile assorted bits and pieces were still coming down.

Sam had just reached the passenger door when a thin, bony, yet surprisingly strong hand grabbed his wrist. Sam looked up into Lice's loathsome face.

"Get out of here, runt," sneered Lice, and flung Sam away. He pulled the snowmobile's door wider.

Yugo jammed his foot down on the accelerator and the snowmobile sped forward. Still Lice clung to the door handle. Yugo shifted into a higher gear and pressed a flashing blue button. Two wings extended from the side of the snowmobile and it started to lift off. The passenger door swung closed, yet Lice would not let go. He pulled himself onto the wing and wrenched the door open again.

"This is quite the contraption," he said to Yugo. "I think I'll take it."

Yugo could not believe how things could have gone so horribly wrong. Iggy was gone, Sam was all alone and here he was, a hundred feet in the air, sharing his beloved snowmobile with a malodorous maniac. He turned the steering wheel hard to the right. The snowmobile turned, but Lice grabbed hold of the seat belt and began pulling himself inside.

"I never seen one of these things before," he said. His hand fell onto an orange lever. "What does this do?" he asked Yugo.

"Don't touch that," Yugo spat out through his clenched teeth.

Lice just smiled and pulled the lever. The snowmobile immediately went into a dive.

Yugo pulled back on the steering wheel and punched some commands into his keyboard. The snowmobile slowly flattened out and began cruising just a few feet above the ice. Then they reached a cliff edge and the snowmobile plunged over it. Again Yugo wrestled the snowmobile back under control and leveled out.

"Be careful," he shouted. "You'll get us both killed!"

Lice did not seem to care. He stabbed at a blue knob and the snowmobile tipped over ninety degrees and accelerated. Yugo flipped the yellow toggle switch and the snowmobile righted itself, but did not lose any of its speed.

"I think that I should drive for a while said Lice and he reached over and grabbed the steering wheel with his steely grip. He pulled and it spun out of Yugo's grasp. With his other hand he grabbed hold of Yugo's tunic and flipped him into the back seat. He swung himself over into the driver's seat. Lice was now in control.

Yugo scrambled back up into the front of the snowmobile and scratched at Lice's face. The wiry criminal just slapped at him and pulled back on the steering wheel. The snowmobile rose higher into the air. Lice swung the snowmobile back towards the cliff. "Better go pick up Worm," he thought. "He'll know what to do.

Yugo looked through the windshield. The snowmobile was racing back towards the cliff now, but Lice had done nothing to increase the altitude. If he did not get higher, and soon, they were going to crash into the side of the mountain.

Yugo pulled back on a black lever. The snowmobile started to rise.

Lice slapped back at him again. "Cut that out," he screamed. Yugo fell back and lost his grip on the lever. Once again, the snowmobile leveled out and continued towards the cliff face.

Yugo made a last desperate grab at the level, but Lice pushed him away. He looked back out the window. It was hopeless. Lice had no idea how to steer the snowmobile and they were headed straight for the cliff. There was no way they were going to miss it now.

The snowmobile smashed into the icy cliff face and exploded like a remote controlled racecar. Nobody who was in the snowmobile could have survived the crash. Great chunks of snow and ice fell down the cliff and shattered onto the rocky waste below.

Then slowly, delicately, a red felt hat slipped through the air and landed on the wreckage.

THE BIT RESPECTING SAM'S SAD DEMISE

SAM WATCHED IN DESPAIR AS Yugo's snowmobile sped away from him. At least it took that freak with him, which made for one less problem for Sam. Unfortunately, Sam still had one problem, and its name was Worm.

Worm was not pleased with the way his careful plan had come apart. He had been counting on using that sled load of dynamite, and, more to the point, had needed his two dim witted accomplices to plant and detonate it for him. It was far too dangerous to do himself. But now he was short one pile of explosives and two assistants. He was feeling a little depressed about it.

Not that he was feeling suicidal, or anything. Worm never got suicidal when he was depressed. No, generally Worm became homicidal when he was depressed, and that was pretty much how he was feeling, now. And the only thing around which might serve as an outlet for this homicidal inclination was Sam.¹¹

Sam turned and saw the strange, yet patently evil glare on Worm's face and decided that this was probably a good time to put his original plan into action. The original plan, you will recall, involved a lot of running away and not much else. So Sam bent into his sprinter's crouch and then took off.

Considering his stubby legs and consequent short stride, Sam was amazingly fast. This was undoubtedly because Sam had so much experience at running away. In the years he had known Iggy and Yugo, it seemed that come Christmastime, there was always something from which he was running away. This year, it appeared, was no exception.

¹¹Strictly speaking, it is not "homicide" when one is dealing with an elf. But I looked it up in the dictionary, and there is no such word as "elficide", even though I think that is probably the proper word to use in this situation.

So Sam ran. His years of experience at sprinting from the first sign of trouble had made Sam a world-class runner. If the North Pole ever decided to enter a team in the Olympics, it is likely that Sam would have won more than a few gold medals.

Needless to say, Worm was not going to let this little man, this dwarf, get the better of him. He had come too far and suffered too much on this trip, and he was not going home until he had killed something. So he ran after Sam.

Worm lacked Sam's speed, and having burned his boots to stay warm, lacked the proper shoes to engage in a footrace in the snow. But what Worm lacked in skill he more than made up for in determination, and in a few minutes, he began to close the distance between himself and Sam.

At about this time, Lice had taken control of the snowmobile from Yugo, and it began spinning around erratically above them. Then it dropped from the sky like a stone, leveled off, and plunged over a cliff. Sam took in these facts without really paying much attention to them. Indeed, almost all of Sam's attention was focused on two simple things.

Run.

Faster.

Which he did.

It was only when he reached the edge of the cliff that Sam suddenly realized he had to stop, and quickly, and that once he had stopped, there was nowhere for him to go. He skidded to a stop at the edge of the cliff. He looked down.

He was hoping to see a big fluffy snow drift a few feet down, but was quickly disappointed. Far below, beneath a swirling band of mist, was a broken pile of ice and rock. There was no way that Sam could survive a fall like that. So he did something very uncharacteristic of him. He turned around and faced his problem.

Worm crashed into him and started pummeling him around the head and neck. They tumbled dangerously near the edge of the cliff. Sam pulled his head under his arms and whimpered.

As the two combatants rolled in the snow, neither of them saw the snowmobile swing back towards the cliff and started to climb. Neither of

them noticed as it leveled off again. And neither of them noticed when it smashed into the side of the cliff below them.

But they both noticed the explosion it made. It shook the ground underneath them. Worm looked up. Sam squinted through a blackened and swollen eye to see why the punching had stopped.

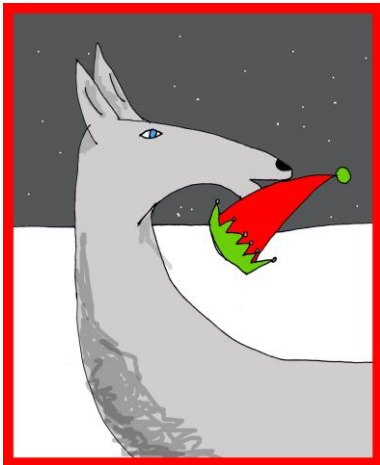
The North Pole is made entirely of ice and snow. There is no dirt or rocks to hold it all together,¹² and as such, it is very unstable. Only five minutes earlier, a dog sled had exploded, and weakened the ice and snow that lay in heaps and piles around the cliff. But this explosion was too much. At once, and all together, the heaps and piles started moving, sliding towards the edge of the cliff where Worm sat on Sam.

Worm did not notice the wall of snow that was headed toward them, because he had returned to his previous task of beating Sam's face to a pulp. Sam was almost thankful when the wall of snow swept them over the edge of the cliff.

At least the punching stopped.

Twenty tons of ice and snow crashed onto the smoldering wreckage of the snowmobile at the bottom of the cliff. A minute later, a red velvet hat fluttered down the steep cliff and settled at the top of the heap.

THE BIT WITH THE HUSKIES IN IT



SOME TIME LATER, MAYBE AN HOUR or maybe a day, it is hard to keep track of the time when the sun does not rise or set, a dog climbed to the top of the big pile of snow, and carefully lifted Sam's hat in his mouth.

He scooted down where he joined five others. It was the dog team Iggy had freed from the dog sled before the dynamite exploded. Two of the others held red velvet caps in their mouths, too. They padded off together.

There was a place they had smelled, not too far away, where they sensed these hats belonged. It was a place where there was noise and

¹² Or for trees to take root for that matter.

light and probably somebody with some food. They reached that place and came to a long low building with a thick wooden door. The dog at the front scratched at the door and whined.

Soon, a big round man in a red suit opened the door. He smelled good. He smelled kind.

The three dogs laid the red velvet hats at his feet. They barked and woofed and then whimpered at little.

Santa Claus frowned, reached down and picked up the little hats. He knew what this meant. After all, he spoke fluent husky. He patted the dogs and stepped back into his workshop. Christmas was scarcely a week away, but they were going to have to stop working for a little while. They were going to have to have a funeral first.

THE BIT THAT HAPPENED A LITTLE LATER, AT THE FUNERAL

AND SO WE FIND OURSELVES at the funeral, where Santa Claus and the elves laid Iggy, Yugo and Sam to rest.

The service was short, but poignant. Santa Claus recounted the heroism of the three departed elves, and all that they had meant to him, and to Christmas over the years. "We'll not see their kind again," he said. He swallowed hard, and continued speaking through his tears. "They are in a better place now. But let none of us ever forget their tremendous sacrifice." Santa walked to the three little coffins and laid a red velvet hat on each of them.

As the three little coffins were lowered into the ground, Santa spoke a quiet prayer. The people gathered at the funeral shuffled and wept quietly.

None of the assembled mourners would have been so surprised by what happened next if only they had known three things. No one could criticize them for not knowing these three things, but perhaps they should have suspected them. After all, was Christmastime, when magical and impossible things happen at the North Pole every year, or at least nine times out of ten.

But nobody there knew any of these three things, even though they probably should have:

- Maggot was between Iggy and the dynamite when it exploded. While it was not nearly as good as being behind the boulder with the others, it was a little like being behind about a half dozen mattresses. The explosion knocked Iggy out and buried him under several hundred pounds of steaming Maggot chunks, but at least they kept him warm until he could recover consciousness.
- As the snowmobile veered toward the cliff face, Yugo reached out and stabbed a flashing green button, which activated the passenger ejector seat, which propelled Yugo up and out of the snowmobile a moment before it crashed. Yugo tumbled through the air, losing his hat, and landed hard, but safely, on a small ledge near the top of the cliff . . .
- . . . where, by a stroke of good fortune he found Sam. Sam had managed to grab the ledge as he was swept over the cliff with Worm (who found no ledge, only that it was a long, long way to the bottom). It took the two of them almost two days to climb down the cliff and make their way back to the boulder, where they found Iggy, revived him, and together they walked back to the North Pole, where a funeral was taking place at that very moment.

The three elves crested the hill overlooking the graveyard. "Aw gee," said Iggy. "It's a funeral."

"I wonder who died," said Sam, scrounging in his pocket for a hard candy, which he tossed casually into his mouth.

"Rotten time of year to have a funeral," said Yugo, "what with it being Christmas and all."

"I guess we had better go down and pay our respects," said Iggy.

"It's the right thing to do," replied Yugo.

Sam just crunched his hard candy between his teeth.

The three elves walked steadily down the hill. It was pretty slow going, because the snow was deep and their legs were short. They arrived at the graveside just as Santa Claus solemnly intoned, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust . . ." He looked up at the gathered mourners and nodded.

Then he saw three bowed heads at the end of the grave that had not been there when the service had started.

As they lifted their heads, Santa started to laugh, his big belly shaking.¹³ The other mourners looked over at Santa strangely. They knew he was jolly, but he was not ordinarily given to laughing at funerals. Then they too saw the three elves, their heads respectfully bowed, paying their last respects at their own funeral. Some of the other mourners started to laugh, too.

Sam nudged Iggy and whispered. "Why are these people laughing? It is really starting to creep me out."

"I know," Iggy whispered back.

Santa Claus walked over and clapped the three elves hard on the back. "Well, what do you know?" he said. "You three made it here after all. Ho," he laughed.

Iggy smiled tentatively. "Yeah, here we are," he said. "Ho ho ho."

Santa Claus laughed louder. "Next time, try to be on time for your own funeral!"

Iggy, Yugo and Sam looked at each other.

"All right everybody," said Santa Claus. "Enough fun and games. The party's over and we've got a lot of work to do. Christmas is only a week away."

The elves all cheered and started walking back towards the workshop. Santa Claus turned to Iggy, Yugo and Sam. "And what are you three waiting for, an engraved invitation? Time to get back to work!"

Iggy and Yugo cheered, too. It looked like their suspension was over and they could get back to making toys. It felt good to be alive. They followed Santa Claus back to the workshop.

Sam just stood at the end of his grave all alone. He looked down at the empty casket at the bottom. "You lucky stiff," he said, and then walked over to catch up with the others.

MERRY CHRISTMAS

¹³Yes, if you must know, just like a bowlful of jelly.