

NORTH POLE LOST

And Other Holiday Stories

William H. Cooke

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To the brave men and women of the
Baltimore City Police Department.

A Halloween Sail

Jack Gin thought he was a somewhat normal guy. Living in his apartment in Annapolis he was trying his best to enjoy his life before it quickly slipped away.

He drank his second glass of red wine and sat on his sofa watching a cable news network as he gulped down his formerly frozen pizza. He wondered just what had become of his life. And he kept trying to stop asking himself why she was divorcing him.

Sometimes he cared and sometimes he didn't. He knew what his friends told him – she was putting on weight and was a crazy bitch. He knew they were right. Yet he was still so much obsessed with her.

“The best I ever had. The best I will ever get,” Jack thought as he watched Chris Matthews spew on about something that he didn't really care all that much about. “Thirty-five years old. I'm becoming an old man. Only a matter of time before I die alone and neglected,” Jack worried.

The doctor had told him to talk with friends about his feelings and to exercise when he got the blues. Seemed that every day these days he was getting the blues. Sometimes they would last for just a moment and wouldn't be that bad. Other times they took over his entire day and he would wonder if he had the strength to go on.

A boring life. That was his problem. Boring job: accountant. Same damn thing every damn day. Same damn office. Same damn co-workers. Same damn places to eat. Same damn tiny and somewhat dirty apartment. At least it was on the water. And he had his boat out there. That would take away some of the pain. And he wouldn't worry as much when sailing about the fact that he hadn't been out of the East Coast, let alone out of the country, in nearly five years. Sailing would take away his pain and make his miserable life just a little bit more bearable until his death.

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Fear takes hold of a mind. “Yeah I can sail now. But I’m becoming an old man. How much longer will I be able to sail. Time will pass quickly and soon I will be in my sixties. Will I be able to sail then? What about seventies? Surely not eighties. Then I will be stuck in a lousy nursing home. No one will visit me. I will spend all day looking out a window, if I am lucky. And every night I will pray for God to take me.”

He was not a very religious man, but he had spoken recently to a cleric about how he felt. “Live life in the moment,” the pastor told him. “There was a worried man who once spoke to God. God told him that His name is not ‘I WAS’ and therefore He was not with the man in his past with his regrets and sins. God told the man that his name isn’t ‘I WILL BE’ because He would not be with the man in his fears and anxieties about the future. God said that His name is ‘I AM’ because He was with the man then in the present and that is where the man should live.” Thinking about this sometimes helped to ease the pain.

Having finished his second glass of wine and his pizza he cleaned up after himself, hit the head, and got his jacket and sailing gloves. It was a nice October evening, Halloween actually, in 2005 and Jack started to feel a little more upbeat about the prospects for his life. It was hard for him to be too depressed when he knew he was going to be sailing in a few minutes.

Locking his door, walking down the steps, and then outside looking up at the stars. It was a clear night and not too chilly. He zipped up his light jacket and walked with a slight spring in his step to his sailboat.

It wasn’t much, but it was more than enough for him. A twenty-six-foot fiberglass boat. Just over thirty years old, with new lines and sheets, new lights, and new sails. Some might have looked at it and seen a pile of junk. But it was his pride. He bought it five years prior for just \$800, but had put hundreds more into it.

Making his way onto the dock, Jack waved to a couple he knew who were motoring by in their new boat. He envied them. Not because they had a motor boat, he despised those. He envied their seemingly strong love for one another.

Thinking more about the couple, he didn’t believe that perhaps one day he could ever have love like that again. He started to pity

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them because their happiness would not last. “In a few years they will die. If they have children, the children will suffer and one day die. And the same goes for their grandchildren,” Jack lamented.

Jack knew that these feelings were not good and wanted so badly to be like others who really could enjoy life. “Were we put on this earth just to suffer?” he asked himself. Digging deep into his soul he decided that the answer was “no,” and that there must be a higher purpose and more profound reason for it all.

The time for reflection over, he unloosened the lines and started the engine. There was just too much for him to do for him to worry about all of these things. This was why he liked sailing, but he knew that his problems would return once secure on land again.

Motoring out of the harbor with his lights on, Jack carefully steered his boat from the tiller.

Harbors come to an end and Jack turned off the engine and hoisted the jib first, which he had rigged up earlier in the day in anticipation of the evening’s sail, and then the main sail.

The wind was good. It usually was on fall nights in the Chesapeake. In summer he couldn’t get a breeze to save his life, but now it was much easier. Fewer boats were on the water--it was both dark and a little cold. On those hot summer days not only could he usually not get a decent breeze, but when he did he had to worry constantly about hitting other ships.

Riding on a beam reach toward the eastern shore of Maryland, Jack felt pretty good. And then his mind started to worry again. First it started out with the simple thought that two years ago when he first started to really get depressed he could not go out on his boat for fear that he would kill himself by jumping off. Discussions with friends and family brought him back from that brink, but just thinking about how depressed he was caused him to become anxious and more sad as he realized that those thoughts again could haunt him without notice.

“No, but I’m doing better now. Doing better. I’m happy now. Or at least happier and getting better.” Jack reassured himself.

He sailed closer to the wind to pick up speed. His boat was really flying now and the worries again left him. He even started to smile a bit.

“Time to tack,” Jack said to himself. He loosened the jib sheets

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on his starboard side. Pretending he was with his love, or at least with a friend, Jack exclaimed, "Ready to tack!" He then replied, "Ready!" Jack then yelled, "Helms alee!" as he steered his boat into the wind. Quickly Jack pulled the jib sheet to bring the jib to the other side. The main adjusted itself.

The tack went well and Jack was soon cruising again at a good pace. He took time to look up at the stars again. And this time he reflected a little more on them.

"My ancestors lived under those same stars, with all of their hopes and fears. Christ lived under those stars. He was lonely many nights under them. I am not alone. Others who are now gone know what it is like. They do not worry now, and they don't want me to worry about anything because the God who allowed those stars to be formed is looking out for me and wants me to be happy," Jack said quietly to himself. A tear rolled down his eye.

Jack started to count his many blessings--his health, his education, his family, his friends, his hope and faith--in no particular order when a bright spotlight from above came over him. For the first few seconds Jack was confused. Then perhaps he wondered if he was being subjected to a divine visit. But when he got the courage to look up that dream was dashed.

"Holy shit!" Jack said as he looked at the huge circular lighted object silently hovering above him.

* * *

Chris and John were out for a ride that night. They loved to explore our planet because they found it such a curious place.

"I really can't understand why these things seem to think that people not from their planet must have strange names," Chris said.

"Yeah like 'Chubacca' and 'Jabba the Hut.' What the hell is that all about? Where do they come up with these names? What keeps them from thinking that we have good, Christian, English names?" John asked.

Two late teenaged space alien men, Chris and John would strike the normal earth observer as odd. Both were light blue in color and had what could best be described as snorkels on the tops of their heads. This feature had evolved due to the fact that their home planet

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was covered with water on 90 percent of its surface, but with no dangerous creatures that would normally eat their kind due to their poor taste they swam often. Other than this the rest of their features were about the same as human features.

Another interesting fact about them was that they spoke English. Yes their kind had their own language, but that had fallen out of popular use several years earlier. After transmissions of *Mr. Bean* found their way into the alien air waves this particular class of beings decided to raise all of their children with English so that the young could get the complete benefit of being about to understand the genius comedy without the need for translation. Of course they dropped using the English accent because they considered it, well . . . silly.

“They think our other planets must have strange names too. But of course we call ours Earth as well, as we live mainly on the dirt or earth. And why do they always assume in their entertainment that other beings must have one world government?” Chris pondered. “Like they are the only ones with different countries and cultures on their planet.”

“And they believe that they are the only ones who have wars and other problems. I find it hilarious that some actually believe that we can solve their problems or offer them any help. They are almost as funny as the worthless ones who believe that we are trying to take over this planet. Like we would want responsibility for them,” John said as he laughed.

“But screwing with them is my favorite pastime,” Chris said as he hovered over a sailboat and hit the lift key.

* * *

Jack started to worry that perhaps the wine he bought was stronger than usual as his boat began to lift slowly out of the water and into the sky under the control of the alien’s light beam.

“This can’t be good,” Jack said in a calm manner. For a man who was usually given to depression and anxiety over small and imagined problems, he was taking this development surprisingly well. It was almost as if he had used up all of his worry already.

“Let’s just see where this is going,” Jack said to himself as his boat continued to rise toward the space ship. It was too late to jump

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out without serious risk, he realized, because his boat was too high in the air.

The bottom of the space ship opened up, and Jack and his sailboat were sucked into it. In a dark large open space Jack's sailboat was held suspended in the air by some sort of anti-gravitational field. Jack stood on his boat and looked around at his strange new surroundings. He continued to remain calm.

There wasn't much to see in the room. The sailboat was suspended about three feet off the ground. It could not stand straight on its keel, but the aliens using their powers kept it steady. The room was largely covered in metallic substances. On the far end of the room sat Chris and John near the controls for the ship. Once Jack caught a glimpse of them he made eye contact and they responded.

"I guess they want to anally probe me," Jack thought. "And I thought my life couldn't get any worse."

The aliens, Chris and John approached the boat. Once they got within a couple feet they spoke.

"Greetings," Chris said. "My name is Captain Zwalkic. This is my Lieutenant, Quzabeck. We come from a far away planet called Gegey," Chris stated with all possible seriousness as he and John tried their best not to break out laughing.

"Hello, my name is Jack Gin. I'm just a guy out sailing," Jack replied. He was a little scared.

"Do not worry," Chris replied. "We mean you no harm. We have come from many light years away to teach you and your people the secrets to happiness and peace. It is our desire to help you and your fellow Earth citizens to live better lives. We will offer you cures for every disease so that you may live hundreds of years. We will show your people how to grow crops that will produce better yields so every person may be fed. We will even offer dating and dieting advice so that all may have more pleasure. We know that you are just a simple sailor and not anyone important. But we have chosen you to be our ambassador because we know your hidden strengths and virtues."

Jack was delighted at these prospects. He smiled because he could see his life getting so much better. Life would have meaning again. Lots of it.

"My friends, I do not think that you will be disappointed in me.

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And I hope that this sets off a new era in my people's history. We will have a golden age that has never been seen before," Jack said with a serious smile.

"First we need to help you off that boat," John said, and then went to a control that caused the boat to float over to a platform which Jack could get onto. Once securely off the boat, the aliens spoke again to him.

"Before we can send you back to Earth, we must instruct you in our ways. We have set up a chamber wherein you can learn all that we know in comfort and ease. All you need to do is sit back and listen to music," Chris said.

"That sounds easy," Jack remarked.

"Indeed it is. Follow me," John said as he took Jack by the hand and led him to a small room where there was a comfortable looking leather reclining chair. John instructed Jack to sit in the chair, told him to put on headphones (which were blaring Bach), and then gave him a blindfold.

"Listen to the music and just relax. We will come back for you in a little bit," John said to Jack after he sat in the chair and right before he dutifully put the headphones and blindfold on.

John shut the door behind him and went out to see Chris.

"Dude, that was brilliant. What was that stupid name you came up with for me?" Chris asked.

"Frankly I don't remember any of the fake names I came up with. And neither does he," Chris said as he smiled. "Now, let's get to work."

About thirty-five minutes later, Chris and John had completed their plans and were ready to get Jack back on his boat.

"This is going to be so cool," John said.

"Yeah," replied Chris.

John went and got Jack out of the room.

"So how do you feel?" John asked Jack.

"Fine. Very relaxed. But I'm not sure that I picked up any knowledge just sitting there listening to the music."

"Oh, but you did," John assured him. "You just don't realize it right now. But over time the knowledge will make itself known and you will understand the universe and know the truth."

"Sounds good to me. What's next?" Jack asked as they walked back into the main room with Chris and the floating sailboat.

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“Greetings again. I hope that Lieutenant Zefvo has been kind to you,” Chris stated. John, really fighting back laughter at this point, turned his head away from the unsuspecting Jack, who just assumed that aliens always told the truth about themselves and their motives.

“Yes, Captain. The Lieutenant was very kind to me. I can’t wait until your precious knowledge is revealed to me,” Jack responded upbeatly.

“We see that you like sailing. And we could equip this boat so that you could sail the universe in it. Imagine yourself sailing the rings of Mars or around the lava pits of Pluto,” Chris said. Jack was oblivious to the fact that Chris was making terrible fun out of his ignorance and gullibility. John had to leave the room before he broke out in laughter.

“First we must send you back to Earth,” Chris said. “But we will visit you again soon with plans so that you may carry out the mission.”

By this point John had reentered the room fully composed.

Jack was asked to get back into his sailboat and told that he would be placed back from where he came. He was told that they would visit him again in a fortnight. Jack didn’t know what a fortnight was. They explained to him that it meant two weeks.

* * *

“This is going to be really great. I can’t believe how lucky I am,” Jack thought as the aliens slowly lowered him down to the water.

After Jack was released into the water, Chris and John just looked at each other and could not control their laughter.

“That was too funny. And he was so stupid,” Chris said.

“He is going to be in for the shock of his life. Too bad we won’t be able to watch everything that happens to him,” John commented.

“But we know what is going to happen to him and that should be enough,” Chris said.

“Yeah, I think you are right. So are you up for some cheeseburgers?” John asked.

“I am. But you know sometimes I wish that I could get a cheeseburger from a fast food place. You know I wish we could go down to McDonald’s and make an order,” Chris lamented.

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“You have got to be kidding me right? They don’t serve anything worth eating. We get the choicest cuts of beef and prepare the food properly. You don’t want that garbage,” argued John.

The two discussed the merits of space craft made burgers versus fast food chain burgers as they navigated their ship over to the American West.

“That looks like a nice cow. Perhaps I should feel guilty about this. After all it is going to set the poor farmer back,” Chris said as he focused his light beam on the cow.

“Feel guilty? After what we did to that poor man on the boat? You’ve got to be kidding me. Besides the farmer will be able to sell the parts of the corpse that we’ll leave to the local hot dog manufacturer or fast food outlet,” John remarked.

“You have a point there, I suppose. Well, get the condiments ready. We really don’t have a lot of time to get these burgers ready before we have to head back home. I need to get the space ship back in seven hours because my dad needs it to take my little sister to school,” Chris said.

* * *

“This doesn’t look like the bay,” Jack said out loud once his boat rested safely in the water.

It was dark all around. It was still night. But the usual landmarks were not in sight. Jack had sailed over much of the bay and nothing looked familiar to him. Yet he sailed his boat through the dark water with the hope of seeing something that he recognized.

Panic set back in. “Christ, they dropped me off in the wrong place. I could be anywhere. How will I get back home?” Jack asked himself as he paced around the boat.

Loud screams could be heard. Strange voices in a strange language came from a motor boat a few feet away. The boat approached. Once within sight Jack could see that men with Asian features, dressed in military garb, and with rifles were near.

“Son of a bitch,” Jack said as he realized that perhaps something had gone horribly wrong. Jack tried to out sail the other boat. But the wind was weak and the other boat was fast.

Screaming at him in their odd sounding tongue, ten men from the

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other boat boarded his sailboat within minutes. Shouting commands at Jack that he did not understand, Jack simply said over and over again that he only spoke English. The men did not care for his attitude. And after one of them went down into his cabin and returned with bags of gel caps filled with a brown substance they started to get very aggressive with him.

“American! Who are you to bring this poison into our country?!” one of them shouted.

Jack, before he was kicked down by the Asian men, had put his head into his cabin and was shocked by what he saw. The whole room was stocked full of bags filled with gel caps which contained a brown substance.

After Jack regained consciousness that night at a local hospital, he was informed by an authority from the Chinese government that he was under arrest for importing heroin.

“I was put here by the space aliens. They have sent me on a mission,” Jack stated to everyone who he saw.

After an evaluation by mental health workers, Jack was found sane enough to stand trial for his crimes.

Later the next month his trial began and after a few hours he was found guilty of importing heroin into China. Still it was a mystery to the authorities how this American managed to get his sailboat, full of heroin, into a river in the middle of China. It was even more of a mystery to Jack’s friends and family back in the States, who knew that he was in Annapolis with his boat earlier that same day. Still the facts were stubborn. However he managed it, Jack was in the middle of China with a boatload of heroin.

No one accepted Jack’s explanations about the UFO. And since two weeks had passed without the promised contact, Jack even thought that perhaps he imagined the whole situation. But the UFO scenario was the only one that made any sense.

“God please send the UFO captain to rescue me,” Jack prayed the night before his execution in December of 2005. He realized that his previous worries paled in comparison. Indeed he felt ridiculous for his past anxieties which were over much less.

In a land with plenty of alleged order and very little freedom, Jack spent his last hours hoping that this all was just part of a creative nightmare.

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“Dear God, let me wake up and let this be over. Why God? Why?” Jack cried over and over.

And soon enough it was over. Put on a truck the next day with other condemned, his hands tied behind his back, and “Drug offender” written on his head in Chinese with a black marker, Jack was led out to the execution field where he was shot among the others. Local school children were brought out by the authorities to witness the event in order to teach them about the dangers of drugs.

Pumpkin Carving Time

It was back. James Feldman laid in his bed and looked at it. He wanted to yell. He wanted to get up. He wanted to wake his wife up and run away from it with her. He couldn't. He was paralyzed. Couldn't speak or even mumble a word. Couldn't turn to his wife. Couldn't even nudge her. Laying in his bed all he could do was just look at the beast standing in his doorway.

Its mouth didn't move. Its smirk was fixed. Yet it cackled wildly. Face lightly aglow, it looked in the direction of James and said "You won't get away with it! She knows." Despite being a vegetable it had a way of expressing itself.

"Why doesn't it just leave? Oh God! What is going on here?" James asked himself as he stared into the eyes of the very pumpkin he had carved two nights before at his wife's co-worker's pumpkin carving pre-Halloween party. The night before the beast had stalked him and now it was returning again.

"I'm here to help you," said the still cackling Jack-o-lantern, which was attached to a tall and portly body which was covered by a long black robe. The beast approached James and stated "I'll help you just like I tried to last night," in its dark, menacing, sinister voice.

"No dear God get away from me!" James screamed in his mind. He was more scared than he had ever been.

"What's the matter James? You don't want my help?" the beast asked as he sat on James's chest and started to interrogate him about his personal life.

"I can't breathe! I can't breathe!" James thought. The pumpkin beast was almost suffocating him with his massive weight.

The head looked at him and as it continued to crow. "Maybe if you told your wife about what you do then I would leave you alone. Or should I tell her for you? I think she would find your activities

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very interesting and would seek a divorce. I have many friends in the law who could help her with that,” the pumpkin told him.

James was too concerned with getting enough air to breathe to be too troubled with what the pumpkin was saying. Although he could hear everything that was said. It had said nearly the exact same thing the night before. And those statements from the pumpkin had kept his mind busy the entire day.

The beast continued to torment James about his unsavory activities, without actually naming them, for several minutes. It felt like an eternity to James. Eventually the pumpkin beast disappeared.

“Jesus Christ!” James exclaimed as he sat up in bed.

“What? What’s going on?” Cindy, James’s wife, asked as she woke up in a dazed and concerned state.

“Another nightmare, I think,” James replied in his concerned voice. He wasn’t sure if it was real or not, but he didn’t want to trouble unnecessarily his wife with it.

“The pumpkin again?” Cindy asked.

“Yeah. It was in here laughing at me like last night,” James replied.

“We’ll it can’t be that pumpkin because we threw that thing out yesterday,” she said as she went back to sleep.

James tried to get some additional sleep as well. But within the hour both were awakened by their alarm clock. It was time to start a new work week.

The warm waters of the shower cascaded over his tall and slightly overweight body. For a few minutes he didn’t think about the pumpkin. As the waters got less warm, his peace receded. Turning it off he grabbed his towel in a desperate attempt to stay comfortable. But the cold winds were blowing outside. His house was old and energy inefficient. He started to shiver.

After he got dressed he went to eat some breakfast. Nothing special just some dry cereal and lukewarm black tea that his wife had put out for him.

“You drank too much at Lauren’s party on Saturday. I bet that alcohol is still in your system causing you to have nightmares,” Cindy remarked.

“Yeah. Maybe,” James said despondently. They prattled on some before each headed out to the rest of the world.

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Cindy took the car and drove to her job at the school. James, as usual, biked to his employment.

Riding parallel to Patterson Park after leaving his trendy house in a newly upscale area of Baltimore City known as Canton, James looked out at all of the lost souls with no place to go and no one to love. He felt pity on the bastards, and it almost made his nightmare tolerable.

Once he arrived at his little paralegal cubicle at one of Baltimore's finest and largest law firms, James focused on some of his other troubles. Piles of paperwork. Discovery and prep work for a big pharmaceutical case needed to be done. He knew that as usual he would be working late. Probably up until ten or eleven o'clock at night. He worked weekends too. And when we wasn't working he went out on the town, usually drinking to excess to take the edge off. His wife the school teacher couldn't understand his burdens or his need to blow off a little steam from time to time. Just one of the things causing stress in their young marriage.

When they had met six years prior he was working just as hard. But she was hoping that he would not continue with his insane hours after they wed. She was mistaken. She complained often about it to him. This upset him. He didn't like the long hours any better. After all he was the one working them. But he didn't feel he had a choice. The job brought home the bacon so to speak. They could enjoy material pleasures they otherwise would not know.

Working through his discovery and other projects, James thought incessantly about this. And he also thought about what the pumpkin was harassing him about. Although the pumpkin never specified the sin, James knew what he was hiding from his wife. And he knew it would damage his already strained marriage. But he had a compulsion. It was hurting him, and he knew that one day it might destroy him if left alone.

Working slower, but still working, James was making progress and went out for a lunch break around the Inner Harbor. Looking at the Halloween decorations, James thought more and more about that pumpkin. Others at the party carved elaborate designs with the help of stencils. James didn't believe in that. His Jack-o-lantern was

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going to be original, even if it wasn't very good. Taking a knife he carved out elongated oval eyes, a triangle nose, and a toothless smirk on the extra large pumpkin that he had purchased earlier in the day at a grocery store.

"He looks angry. Looks like he could kill someone," Rachel, one of his wife's co-workers had remarked in jest.

In his drunken state, James was offended by this. And as he glanced up in the sky he by chance spotted a shooting star in the starlit Carroll County night. Believing the popular childhood myths for a moment, James wished that his Jack-o-lantern would come to life and smite those who mocked it. He warned, in good humor, some of those who made fun of his pumpkin that that might just happen. As he ate his lunch, James became concerned that this had happened in a sense.

He didn't have the context to understand the pumpkin incident. He didn't particularly believe in ghosts or demons. He was a secular Jew. He also lacked a good understanding of science and psychology. He didn't know what the hell was going on. He was certain that he wasn't experiencing a dream, although he told his wife that he was. The only thing he knew was that his pumpkin had twice attacked him during the early morning hours and confronted him with his secret.

The day dragged on as usual. One of the associates bitched to him about the quality of some documents that he had put together. To that associate James acted as if he cared. To his co-workers he acted as if he didn't. To some degree he did care. Just another stress on his already worried mind.

Feeling a bit frustrated, James left work early that night at eight. Riding through the streets of Baltimore on his bike, James was attacked by a group of teenage Baltimore natives who ran after him throwing rocks. "Hell Night," he thought to himself as he peddled, successfully, with all of his might to avoid their attack.

* * *

Arriving home he locked up his bike in the back of the house. And on top of the trash can in the back of his yard he saw the pumpkin. It was facing him again. He thought he heard the cackling again.

"Just my mind. It's just in my mind," James thought over and

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over again. He got nervous as he walked in the house after seeing the pumpkin. Either he was crazy or being haunted. Neither thought offered him much comfort, and as he engaged in more meaningless conversation with his wife he debated with himself which one would be worst.

The wife was happy that he was home again early. And she was feeling a bit needy. Romantic and even kinky thoughts went through her somewhat beautiful head.

She prodded him to have relations with her.

"I'm too stressed out from work. I'm going for a walk after I change," James said to her disgust. Leaving her to seek her own pleasure and to dream about the better days, James went off on what she assumed to be his nightly solitary stroll through the streets of Canton. Returning sweaty and tired, James hit the shower again before retiring in his bed next to his lonely wife.

"Do I have to take out the trash tonight?" James asked as he started to get comfortable.

"No, Monday is trash day. We don't put it out again until Thursday," his wife matter-of-factly replied.

"Oh. I forgot" James said. Tired and exhausted from his walk, the stress of his job, and the loss of sleep due to the pumpkin experiences, James didn't give it any more thought and went to sleep.

Four in the morning came and James found himself awake. He had had another nightmare – not the oddly awake pumpkin one: Just a normal one where he was being chased by people, mostly cops. He lay there in his bed. He could move. There was no laughing pumpkin. "Thought this would be the day for it to happen. Halloween morning. Sort of expected a finale. Maybe it was just in my head. Stress. That's all," James thought as he put his head to the other side of the pillow and went back to sleep feeling somewhat relieved.

The rest of the day was uneventful as well. His wife in the morning had commented to him about how much more upbeat and happy he was. She indicated that she wanted relations with him that evening. He suggested he was not opposed to that. With a spring in his step he went to work.

On his computer at work in the morning while trying to update a rather large database, he saw a pumpkin, his pumpkin, moving across the screen. The Jack-O'-Lantern from hell was back.

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“No, get off my screen! Get off my computer!” James yelled loudly attracting attention.

“Why don’t you tell her? Tell her you pussy! She has a right to know!” the demon taunted him. A handful of his co-workers were looking into his cubicle as they watched him move his mouse around the computer furiously clicking to catch this head that they could not see. To himself he would mumble, “I’m going to get you. I’m going to kill you!” in response to all of the pumpkin’s taunts.

“James! James! Calm down!” said a young partner entering his cubicle. The man put his arms around James and moved him back from the computer. James was despondent now. He thought the pumpkin had gone, but it was back and in new form to torment him. Still unsure of his own mental condition, James was overwhelmed and started to cry.

The partner knew that James would be useless at least for that day and sent him home early. The attorneys on his side of the floor were told to keep an eye on him to watch for additional troubling behavior.

* * *

Knowing that his troubles were multiplied, James got on his bike and rode up to the harbor. He thought about jumping. But that would be silly. He knew how to swim, he reminded himself.

So instead he picked up two big bottles of wine and a large pizza to slowly kill himself with.

Back at his house during the afternoon, James started in on his gorge. After he finished half the pizza and half a bottle of wine, he started to contemplate his fate.

“I’ll just tell her,” he eventually decided. The pumpkin and the guilt were getting to him. What he was doing was not horrible. The stress of his job, where he had to work such long and grueling hours, was wearing down on him and causing him to act in abnormal ways. Still it was dangerous and stupid. Reckless. His wife wouldn’t like it, but he felt like the pumpkin was giving him no choice. Perhaps he could get some help and the beast would leave him alone.

“Halloween 2006,” James said as he held his wine glass. “Either my life is saved or damned today.”

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Cindy came in. She was surprised to see him. She was happy to see him. “Maybe I’ll wear my schoolgirl costume tonight. It always drove him wild!” she thought. “And put out a bowl of candy for the kids treat-or-treating so we won’t be bothered.”

Cindy looked at James. She could see that he was drunk and not happy.

“Oh my God, what’s wrong dear?” she asked as she watched him start to break down crying.

She ran to him and sat down next to him. She put her hands around him. Filled with liquid courage and the hope that the Jack-o-lantern would finally leave him alone, James blurted out his secret.

* * *

She continued to hold him. But she was disturbed and in shock. She didn’t understand. She asked questions. Crying he told her the answers. She asked more questions. He got sick of the conversation and stormed off into the night. Angry, sad, and drunk. It was not his best night.

She stayed with him that night. Without announcing it beforehand, the next day she didn’t go home. Instead she stayed with her mom. James stayed in the house a while longer. A few months passed. Lawyers were involved. The house was sold and James downsized to something cheaper. A few more months passed, and James got a less stressful job. It paid significantly less, which he didn’t like. And with his legal bills things were even tighter. He soon realized that he had traded the stress of his job for just another kind of stress. Still it was good, he thought, to have a different kind of stress for a change. Maybe in the future he would take another job with longer hours.

Reconciliation had been attempted with the wife. The wife wanted to take her vows seriously. But the recent revelation on top of the other strange behavior and his previously long office hours made that less likely.

They both just decided to go their own separate ways. A year had passed. It was around Halloween again, in 2007. James felt relaxed and to some degree at peace. Much of the guilt was gone. He had a network of friends and family who cared for him to some degree.

Sadly however, James had put on about fifty pounds during the

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year and was terribly overweight. No longer did he have a wife to cook reasonably healthy foods. Moved out of Canton and into a cheaper house in southern Pennsylvania, James didn't have as easy access to good take-out foods like sushi. Because he lived so far from his new employer he could not bike to work. He sold his bike and drove everywhere. And to save money he often picked up double cheeseburgers from McDonald's for lunch and dinner. He was a sad sight, but he kept telling himself that he would diet. And he was not worried about his secret all the time. He was happier.

Waking up on that Halloween morning, however, he heard that horrible cackling. He could not understand what it wanted.

As he lay there paralyzed, the Jack-o-lantern just looked at him and cackled. Terrified, James just looked at the pumpkin and hoped for the best. The beast again came over to him and sat on his chest. It was heavier than usual. He couldn't breathe. Overwhelmed, he tried and tried to scream, but as always he couldn't. He was overwhelmed in a panic he could not express.

His wife was very sad about what happened and often deluded herself into thinking that had she and James not gone to the pumpkin carving party, she would still be happily married and James would not have died of a massive heart attack alone in his bed. She took some comfort in the fact that the medical examiner told her that the man she used to love so deeply had died in his sleep, and had not likely suffered any pain.

A Baltimore Thanksgiving

The Johnson family gathered in Baltimore to celebrate Thanksgiving in 2013.

Sadly, not everyone was there. Two dear members of the family had been lost in the prior year. Their places at the table were not set. But the void was there in the hearts of everyone present.

“My goodness, this has been a terrible year. Losing John and then DeAndre,” Virginia Johnson said as she sat down at the table in her Southwest Baltimore house.

“I don’t know how we’ve survived,” Mary said. She and her mother looked at each other and shared the pain in their eyes. Mary almost broke out in tears after they shared that look. But she then looked at her new man, Tavon, and her two children, Corey and Shytise Johnson, for strength.

“Taken so violently. Like our lives don’t even matter. Like we are just trash,” Virginia bluntly remarked. “When will people learn not to use those tools of violence. We’ve got to put a stop to it,” she said as she started to break down into tears.

Mary started to cry as well. And Tavon along with Mary’s two children were becoming moved as well.

“Things will get better. We just have to have hope,” Tavon said as he stood up and put his arms first around his girlfriend of several months and then around the woman who he hoped would be his future baby’s grandmother. “Things always get better,” Tavon said to reassure them.

Virginia and Mary curbed their tears and sat back down at the table.

Idle conversation followed. Everyone took part in eating the appetizers. They took little heed of Grandma Virginia’s warnings

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not to ruin their appetites with the morsels of assorted foods. Even Virginia ate a little too much.

The dinner was ready, but Virginia, old with age, knew that conversation would tend to dry up with them once the main course was presented. So she hid it and encouraged the family discussions as she knew that Thanksgiving was about more than food. She knew it was about family and especially after losing two family members so tragically the previous year she wanted more time for everyone to talk to one another.

Tavon answered Virginia's questions about his line of work. They had only met a handful of times before and had never really gotten a chance to know each other.

"I do home improvement work. You know raking up leaves, cleaning gutters, cutting lawns, painting, plumbing. There is just so much work in this city for people with my skills. I just clean up. And it's all cash," Tavon proudly remarked. "So you clean up good."

Virginia was not terribly impressed. She talked about her husband John and how he worked for the railroad for many good years. She bragged about all of the benefits that John received from his employer and about how those benefits still helped her out even in the present.

"That type of security is what you need, young man. Working outside doing odd jobs is good for a teenager," Virginia lectured. "But you need to think about Mary and her children, as well as your own future."

Tavon bit his tongue. He knew how much money he was taking in. Of course he also knew how much money he was wasting on trinkets and baubles. His new gold rims had set him back many a penny. But it was worth it in Tavon's mind. They looked damn good on his Cadillac. With his fuzzy dice around the rear-view mirror and pumping loud sound system, Tavon cruised in style and didn't give a damn what granny said. Still, his mama had taught him to respect his elders, especially the female ones.

"I am thinking about Mary and the kids, Miss Virginia" Tavon responded as respectfully and forcefully as he good. "I'm making good investments."

"In what, gold teeth?" Virginia responded sarcastically and with a bit of bitterness that beforehand had not been seen. She then grinned

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a little as if to say that she wasn't really serious once she saw the disgusted looks on the faces of Tavon and Mary.

"Mom, Tavon is a good man. He works hard and makes good money. I get benefits for myself and the kids through my work. I don't need him for that. I just need him for his love," Mary said as she put her arm around Tavon and hugged him as he smiled.

"I guess that it just how things are today. I'm sorry to have raised the topic," Virginia said somewhat sheepishly as she attempted to change the conversation.

Before Virginia could change the conversation, Shytise and Corey started to complain about where the dinner was. They wanted the main course.

"Okay, okay. I'll get it for you," Virginia said. She had seen that her attempts at creating a conversation at the dinner table had blown up in her face. She managed to alienate Mary's new lover when all she wanted to do was to give the young man some good motherly advice.

"But before we eat, we must pray," Mary insisted.

"Yes. We must. Tavon, you being the man of the house perhaps you could lead us," Virginia said as she smiled at Tavon in an attempt to make up for her remarks about his employment. She still didn't greatly care for Tavon or think that he was much of a man, but she did not want to upset her relationship with her dear daughter. Mary was all that she had left since her husband, John, had died.

Delighted at this prospect of saying the prayer, Tavon smiled a rather large smile that revealed his investments.

"Dear Lord, we think about who we have lost this past year," Tavon said lowering his head. "John and DeAndre both taken from us and so violently. Both shot through the head. And we think about how violent this city has become for us. We seek your relief. We seek your help. Nourish and strengthen us with this food that you have given us. We thank you for it and ask that you bless us."

"Amen," was the response from everyone.

"Good, let's eat. Follow me," Virginia said as she stood up. The others at the table followed her. She led them up the stairs.

"I knew it was up here," Corey said as he smiled. "I heard it when I came in," he bragged to his sister.

"We all heard it," Shytise responded in a way that sent a clear message to her older brother that he was an idiot in her opinion.

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“Help! Help!” screamed several persons young and old from behind the bathroom door.

“Mommy! What is happening?” a young girl said as the door to the bathroom started to open. “Please don’t let the monsters hurt us Daddy!” the same voice cried.

“You are going to pay for this!” a man’s voice said with much anger and vigor.

Grandma Virginia Johnson stepped out of the way and allowed Tavon to open the door. “You can have the honor of eating first,” she said to Tavon, another attempt to smooth things over with him.

“Thank you,” Tavon said graciously as he proudly accepted the honor of starting the feast.

Opening up the bathroom door on the second floor, Tavon was attacked by a man as that man’s wife and two small children, both girls, watched in horror.

“Fucking assholes,” the middle-aged black man said as he punched Tavon about his body and attempted to free himself and his frightened wife and daughters.

Tavon paid the man no mind. Although he and the Johnson family members were quite capable of engaging on conversation as they ate, they all usually resorted just to moaning “Brains. . . brains . . . brains ..” They had seen it once before in a movie.

Tavon started to take bites out of the man as he entered the bathroom. The non-zombie man screamed in horror and pain. His wife and children did the same, especially as they started to get eaten by the members of the Johnson family. Corey started to bite into the older girl, who was about ten. Shytise had her way with the younger girl, who was about six. Virginia and Mary found themselves splitting the non-zombie mother. They were both trying to lose weight, so they were happy to split the meal.

Amid the crying and condemnations, Tavon finished his meal first leaving the man’s partially eaten corpse on the ground of the small bathroom. He was a fast eater. In the crowded space, which incidentally was not used for the normal purposes any more since zombies didn’t bathe or concern themselves with where they expelled waste, the Johnson family continued to enjoy the feast.

Unconcerned with the suffering inflicted, they left the bodies, which were only somewhat consumed, on the ground, and went back

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downstairs to watch some T.V. They had eaten well. They all had more than enough, especially of brains.

Tavon and the Johnson family had no idea what they had become after the meteor had hit the Earth in late 2012, causing their abnormality. It had caused this abnormality in many, but not most. To them they were still normal people. They didn't think of themselves as zombies. And they didn't even realize that their neighborhood had become a wasteland--well, really a bigger wasteland. Virginia still couldn't understand why anyone would kill John and DeAndre. They didn't do anything bad to anyone. They were good Christian people. And they still thought that they were employed and lived the same lives they had lived before the meteor hit.

Later that evening, the family of normal people in the bathroom found themselves regenerated as zombies. Tavon and the Johnson family members thought nothing of it when their dinner just got up and walked out of the house in search of something to eat.

North Pole Lost

Prologue

Glory to God in the highest. And on Earth, peace to men of good will. We praise Thee. We bless Thee. We worship Thee. We glorify Thee. We give Thee thanks for Thy great glory, O Lord God, heavenly King, God the Father almighty. Lord Jesus Christ, the Only-begotten Son. Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father Who takest away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. Who takest away the sins of the world, receive our prayer. Who sittest at the right hand of the Father, have mercy on us. For Thou alone art holy; Thou alone art Lord; Thou alone, O Jesus Christ, together with the Holy Ghost, art most high in the Glory of God the Father. Amen.” The old bishop proclaimed the Mass in Latin in a cold dark cathedral lit only by a few candles.

“May the Lord be with thee,” he continued.

In an uncertain, childlike voice came the response, also in Latin, “And with thy Spirit.”

From there the bishop continued on with the sacrifice of the Mass and in English only when he began his sermon.

“The Sunday before the start of Advent is where we are. And therefore we know that we have so little precious time to prepare ourselves for the Mass of Christ. And I know as well as any of you the extra time that we will have to spend to complete our mission. It is hard, grueling work, but it is glorious work. Spreading Christmas joy is our call. We do it in good cheer because we know that the Lord labors with us. Because we know that children all over the Christian world depend on us and find their faith strengthened as a result,” The bishop said as he smiled.

Wearing red vestments the cleric stood at the podium in the

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old wooden white cathedral that had its pews filled with contented looking elf faces as he continued to speak.

“Looking at the stained glass windows, we are reminded of others who were called to bear more difficult burdens for the Christian faith. St. Ignatius of Antioch was fed to the wild beasts. And St. Stephen was stoned by the Jews. These men and women remind us that we must not fear God’s work, but rather embrace it, wherever it may lead us. Even if it means facing down the enemies of all that is good and true!” The bishop pounded his fist on the podium as he made this last statement. This startled his audience a bit.

“Others might fear our mission. War has descended upon Europe. The enemies of justice reign in Germany. And our ancient enemy, the Leprechauns, still run wild across Ireland with no control. They rape and pillage. They murder Christian children as they sleep in their beds at night. Christian elves are made to serve them as slaves. And they have aligned themselves with even darker forces. We owe it to this group to subdue them for the benefit of their souls,” the bishop proclaimed. The elves nodded their heads in agreement.

“It is tempting to want to ignore the threat that they pose to us. But that cannot be an option. We must prepare to take appropriate actions for the good of all. We must continue to make sacrifices so that they will not win and so Christmas can be preserved. This is what Christ calls us to do. And I invite you to stand strongly with me as we do that,” the bishop said as he concluded his sermon.

The bishop continued the Mass and performed the consecration, and many of the elves went to the altar where the bishop placed the Host onto the tongues of his tiny parishioners.

Closing the Mass the bishop prayed aloud, again in Latin, “Holy Michael Archangel, defend us loyal servants in the day of battle; be our safeguard against the wickedness and snares of the devil, and his servants on earth the Leprechauns and their allies. May God rebuke all of them, we humbly pray, and do thou, prince of the heavenly host, by the power of God thrust down to hell Satan and all wicked spirits, especially the Leprechauns, who wander through the world for the ruin of souls.”

“Amen,” his elf altar boy replied.

The bishop continued with one last prayer: “We beseech Thee, almighty God, that Thy servant, myself, who has been called by

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Thy mercy to rule over this land, may receive from Thee an increase in all virtues. Fittingly adorned with this, may I be able to shun all evildoing and conquer our enemies and, finally, being well pleasing before Thee attain unto Thee who art the Way, the Truth and the Life. Through Christ our Lord.”

“Amen” replied the altar boy.

The bishop left the sanctuary through the back door and stepped into the sacristy. He was tired and didn't feel much like talking with the elves who attended the Mass. He generally didn't like doing that. He preferred to avoid too much social interaction with them. Disrobing out of his clerical garments he slipped into his overalls, put on his coat, and then went outside and put on his skis.

After traveling about a half mile he was home. Taking off his skis he entered the house where he took off his coat and made himself some hot chocolate spiked with vodka.

“Even Santa needs a break,” he said as he sat down at his favorite sofa, which was right in front of the fire, and put his feet up.

To the casual observer it would not seem like a bad life for Santa or the elves. Left alone on a large island of mostly ice at the North Pole, Santa used his position to deliver presents every year to Christian boys and girls who were good and who believed in him. It was difficult keeping up his list, but he had paid informants who helped him a great deal. The yearly pilgrimage around the world wore him down a bit. But his magical sleigh and eight magic reindeer always served him well.

“The elves are lucky to have me,” Santa said to himself as he watched the fire burn in his fireplace. His large house was decorated with Christmas cheer. It was like that all year.

“They were nothing, all lost and cold, before I came along,” Santa said as he had another gulp of vodka.

And indeed the elves were lost and cold when Santa found them in the late-seventeenth century. On the verge of death. They had set out from England in the mid-seventeenth century. They had been in search of the New World. These elves had refused to accept the Protestant Reformation and instead stayed loyal to the Pope. But most of the English elves were Reformers. A terrible civil war was fought among the elves. The Catholic elves lost, so they left. Not then experts at navigation, they drifted off onto the North Pole where

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they tried their best to establish a colony. Most lived in icehouses and ate driftwood. In England their fellow elves had mud huts to live in and ate grass.

Santa arrived shortly thereafter. After his death in the ancient world, Santa was surprised to wake up ten days later from his rest. He had enjoyed his rest and resented his coming back. But he figured that God had sent him on a mission. Little did he know that it would take hundreds of years for him to figure out just what that was.

Nicholas left Asia Minor and wandered for many years until he arrived in Holland in the tenth century. There he made toys for a living. He did not hold himself out as a bishop then because that would open up too many questions – such as “Who consecrated you? When? Where?” and that would require very unbelievable answers.

Nicholas was a devout Catholic, however, who always attended Mass. Back in his earlier days there was not a division between the Western and Eastern Churches. Nor was there Protestantism. After the divisions, Nicholas examined the arguments for and against all churches and decided to throw his lot in with Roman Catholicism, which he was convinced was correct. Nicholas, as a bishop (albeit a non-practicing one) also very much liked Rome’s assertions of temporal, along with spiritual, power. The Eastern bishops and Protestant ministers gave up too much authority, he felt.

This may seem odd given that Nicholas was born in a time when the Church had no power and was subjected to the whims of an emperor. But Nicholas felt these persecutions firsthand, which strengthened his view that the Church should exercise temporal power to make sure that the Church could not be persecuted.

Nicholas embraced his own legend while in Holland and popularized it. By the mid-fourteen hundreds he was calling himself Santa, dressing up as a bishop each Christmas to commemorate himself, and giving toys to well-behaved little children.

Santa was very popular and even gave gifts to Protestant children after the Reformation started. When he did this he would normally tell the children and their parents that they ought to return to Rome. Santa wished the State and Church would demand their conversion for the sake of their souls. But the Dutch grew more tolerant and eventually embraced Protestantism by and large.

Santa made some enemies in the Protestant community and by the

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late seventeenth century there were rumors started about him – that he was a witch, that he was molesting children. None of it was true. But he did strike everyone as odd – no one ever knew where he came from and he seemed to be living forever. People from all religious communities started to wonder.

Late one night, before he could be arrested, Santa left Holland on a sailboat and hoped for the best. The winds of fate brought him to the elves after a few weeks.

Santa had never noticed elves before when he was in Europe. Most people didn't. It wasn't because the people couldn't see them. It was only because no one bothered to look for them. Alone and searching for friends, Santa had no trouble seeing the little fellows who stood about two to three feet high.

The elves, a trusting lot, were surprised but unconcerned when he arrived. Indeed, once he told them who he was, they were very happy. They had all heard stories about his good nature and perceived immortality. The elves seemed to live long lives themselves and generally only died when subjected to violence, so they were not disturbed by Santa's longevity. There was no concern that Santa was a witch or otherwise in league with Satan.

Santa at first showed the elves how to build structures using drift wood. Then he showed them how to fish and to build fires. Santa taught them how better to navigate their boats to collect supplies. As a bishop, Santa took care of their spiritual needs. There was not an elf priest in the group. They were all killed by the English elves before the rest of the Catholic elves were expelled.

The elves were well pleased with these developments. In the year 1715, all three thousand plus of them proclaimed Santa their governor.

But his governorship was not completely trouble free. In the year 1725, the community was nearly wiped out by an attack from Bigfeet. Nearly three dozen of the beasts had stormed the North Pole unexpectedly and for no apparent reason. Being in an isolated, cold wilderness had not protected Santa and the elves.

The elves did not know what to do. Santa did his best to organize his elves, and they fought back the invasion. Half the population was wiped out. Santa encouraged elves to reproduce, and they did so until the population was back to slightly higher than pre-invasion numbers.

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In 1730, Santa had set up a government apparatus in the North Pole with an elf military, diplomatic corps, courts, and a parliament. All government officials were hand-selected by Santa and answered to him alone. Santa did not trust the elves to know what was best for them. After all, *they* were the ones found hungry and basically homeless. Santa's officials signed a peace treaty with the Bigfoot King, Sackawallic, in 1732. It turned out that the Bigfeet were invading because they so enjoyed the candy canes that Santa had produced with the help of his elves and wanted more of them. His elves had imported the sugar from Iceland, which had gotten it from Cuba. These treats very soon became popular over much of the North Atlantic world, and were traded by the elves for supplies. Santa's government agreed to supply the Bigfeet with an unlimited supply of candy canes in return not just for peace but also for protection against other forces. The Bigfoot leader also agreed to use his magic to allow Santa's sleigh and reindeer to fly around the world. This allowed Santa for the first time since his arrival to deliver toys outside of the North Pole.

Santa's popularity at this point was at an all-time high, which was good since the elves did not have a choice. Santa was to remain in charge.

The only other problem the North Pole had was with Leprechauns, whom Santa accused of killing Christian children and elves in Ireland. Santa got his information from Irish elves who resented the domination of the Leprechauns on their island. During his Christmas visits to the island, Santa would make a point to kill a few each year. And Santa's navy even abducted Leprechauns as revenge and put them to work in camps making toys. The Leprechauns always promised revenge, but Santa was confident in his own armed forces.

This was the end to the official history in the North Pole.

Chapter 1

Bless me Father for I have sinned. It has been six months since my last confession,” the tiny voice said.

“Tell me your sins,” Santa ordered.

“I have not always been patient with fellow elves or even with my family. I have taken the Lord’s name in vain. And I have stolen gingerbread from the factory because I enjoyed the taste of it. I am sorry for these sins and ask for forgiveness,” the elf lamented.

“We all make mistakes in this life, my son,” Santa calmly replied. Then Santa said the prayer of absolution which relieved the elf of his burden. He told the elf to say one Our Father as penance. “Go in peace and sin no more,” Santa commanded.

“Thank you,” the elf said with gratitude as he left the confessional.

It was Sunday evening on the last Sunday before Advent, and Santa was hearing confessions as he did every other day in the evening. After resting at his house for a few hours, he had put back on his skis and headed back to the cathedral. About three elves had shown up for that night’s Sacrament.

“Bless me father, for I have sinned. It has been about three weeks since my last confession,” another elf said as he entered the booth.

“Tell me your sins,” Santa said.

“The sin I want to confess is a sin of envy. I envy my neighbor and covet his wife. He has a better job than me and earns more Santa dollars. And his wife is so pretty. I think about her often, even when I am with my own wife. Quite frankly, I am worried that I have become less attracted to my own wife,” the elf stated.

“My dear elf, have you ever thought to think that perhaps your cross on this earth is to bear a marriage to an unattractive wife and to make fewer Santa dollars? I know it sounds like a terrible thing, but

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is it not better than other crosses that man have been called to bear?" Santa asked.

"I never thought of it like that," the elf said in a surprised tone.

"Do not envy your neighbor. He has been given less a share in the sufferings of Christ. Thank God that you have been given a greater part, though you are unworthy," Santa said. Then again he prayed the prayer of absolution, told the elf to say one Our Father as penance, and told the elf to go and sin no more.

"Bless me father for I have sinned. It has been one week since my last confession," the all-too-familiar elf voice said.

"What troubles you, my son?" Santa asked, knowing full well the answer.

"I have tried praying and praying to our Lord and our Lady. But I cannot stop masturbating. I just love doing it so much. I want to stop, sometimes, but usually I don't want to even though I know it is sinful. Please help me," cried the elf.

"What do you want me to say?" Santa asked in a rhetorical manner. "You have fallen short of what God calls you to do. I cannot offer a magic solution to you. You are doing the right thing by confessing it. Trust in the mercy of God and ask that your will conform to His," Santa said with a note of resignation. He was tired of this elf coming to him every week to confess the same damn thing. But he was happy that at least this week the elf was not also confessing sodomy, as he often did. Santa said the prayer of absolution, told the elf to say two Our Fathers and was done with it.

Happy with his exercising of the Sacrament, Santa put on his skis and went back to his house to enjoy more hot chocolate spiked with vodka before the fire.

"Santa is the hero of the world, second to Christ. Why do these evil creatures attack him and covet his belongings?" St. Nick pondered as he drank his seventh spiked hot chocolate as he sat in front of the fire and rubbed his plump belly.

"God punish these enemies and all who would seek to destroy the peace I have created up here for myself and more importantly for my loyal elves!" Santa cried out.

Drunk, he got up off his sofa and started to wander around his three-story mansion. Furnished nicely with materials purchased from Europe, Santa enjoyed as much luxury as possible on the North Pole.

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He looked out at the cold, dark night. It was always cold in the North Pole, and it was always dark that time of year. He felt a bit sad, but was not depressed. He knew that there was too much important work to do.

Falling asleep, Santa did not rest terribly well. He had to get up several times during the night to urinate. He already had this problem due to his extreme age. Drinking to excess, as he often did, especially around Christmas time, made it even worse.

While letting out some urine, Santa reflected on the fact that he was well over 1,500 years old. And he pondered again, as he had so many times before, just why he was still alive. "To spread Christmas joy and to provide a tiny foretaste of Christ's coming kingdom on earth," was the best reason that he had come up with. And that night he thought of that reason again.

Chapter 2

Christmas year ending in 1939 will be a challenge,” an elf by the name of Grover McClain stated as he pointed his pointer at a chart showing the slow pace of toy production.

“Supplies are in short supply with the war and preparations for it. Shipping has been disrupted as well. And the labor force, notably the Leprechaun workers, have been less motivated. The Leprechauns are passing at a greater rate and replacing them has been more expensive,” McClain somberly remarked to the other elves in the board room and to Santa, who looked displeased.

“At this rate, I’m afraid that we will only be able to deliver toys to about one third of the worthy children. This, unfortunately, looks to be our worst Christmas year ever. Unless there is a dramatic change in world affairs and an increase in our labor force, there will be many disappointed boys and girls on December 25,” the elf lamented as he hung his head, too ashamed to look at Santa.

“This is unacceptable!” Santa exclaimed. “I hired you Grover to improve the system. To upgrade and to streamline our production. You promised to be more efficient, to produce more toys, and to expand our operations. And here you stand and serve me this garbage? I could have hired a troll and gotten the same results!” raged Santa as he stood up and put his face in front of the tiny elf.

“I’m sorry, sir. I’m sorry. Please let me explain,” the previously calm elf said as his voice shook and his feet quaked in his tiny elf boots. The other five elves on the board all sat around the table, nervous and excited about what might happen next. Each of them knew that if Grover McClain lost his job, then one of them would next serve as CEO of Santa’s production company.

“Explain? The results speak for themselves. Tell me why I

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shouldn't assign you to production?" Santa angrily asked as he continued to stare down the frightened elf.

"Please Your Excellency. Look at the data, we have a workforce and resources about equal to what they were eighty years ago, but if you look at toy production data we are producing about double the toys that we produced then. We are more efficient. But factors outside of my control are keeping us from making production. I have no control over the recruitment of labor. I have no control over the shortness of supplies caused by the coming war in Europe. Unless these external factors are addressed, I don't see how I can get up to speed. But once they are addressed we will overproduce toys for the children. And we will make even better toys. Please see that," the elf pleaded as he looked down at his charts, too afraid to stare back at the angry Santa.

"I suppose you have a point," Santa calmly said as he sat back down. "These are factors outside of your control. Our armed forces could collect more labor. The camps could be run better to maximize production, though, and that is partly your domain. But the supplies are short, due to the war. I will have to give you more time, and we will have to make due with what we have this year. Still, if production does not improve I'm afraid you won't be in your position much longer. And like I said we can find a place for you in production. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I understand completely," the elf replied. He was relieved that he was out of danger for the moment and showed it with his now more relaxed and confident voice and demeanor.

The rest of the meeting continued without incident, with the elves and Santa discussing the types of toys that were being produced for the lucky children who would get them.

Later that Monday Santa returned to his house, where he drank some very strong eggnog. A few elves were around his house cleaning and preparing food. Santa ate at his leisure. The elves left prepared food on ice; Santa had only to place it over the fire to heat it.

By mid afternoon, Santa was pretty well loaded. He usually was around this time of day. Walking around his house, after most of the elves had left, he cursed the Leprechauns. He also cursed the darkness. Winter, with its continual darkness, caused many of the elves to become depressed. Some even took their own lives. This

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hurt Santa most of all. Having to deny them a Christian burial and unable to provide any meaningful comfort to the elf's family was the worst. He held out little hope for their little souls, and their bodies were cast out of the community and into the wilderness, to be consumed by the wildlife.

Chapter 3

The next day Santa met with his military commanders in the morning. General Sam Bygone, leader of the elf land forces, showed Santa some of his troops.

The North Pole then had a population of about four thousand free elves. Just less than half were adult males. Each able-bodied adult male was a member of the Homeland Defense Force and required to participate in occasional training. Female elves were also trained in some of the deadly arts in case there was another invasion.

Three hundred elves were full-time military personnel. Of that 300, 250 were in the army. The rest were in the navy.

“Santa, you can see that we are well-equipped,” General Bygone said as he walked past the columns of elves standing at attention and holding very pointy sticks. “These elves are deadly. They can throw their sticks with good aim and they are also trained in close-quarter combat,” the General proudly stated.

Santa was not so impressed. He just shook his head as he walked by the troops.

“May I ask why you look so displeased, Your Excellency?” the General asked as he started to get concerned.

“I thought we talked several times over the years about equipping these elves with better weapons. The trolls have been using metal swords for years. The Leprechauns have some metal themselves and at least have stronger wood. Why can’t this be improved on?” Santa asked.

“The troubles over in Europe have caused shortages. We are just not able to get the strongest materials. And the best materials go first to the production of toys. We are doing the best that we can. Many of the officers have small metal knives. And these elves are deadly

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with their sticks. They are not going to be taken lightly by any foe,” the General asserted, a bit unsure of himself.

“General, I know that you are a good elf. And I know that you work hard. I cannot be angry with you. You fought so bravely against the Bigfeet when they attacked. Without you I don’t believe that this land would have survived,” Santa remarked.

“I appreciate your trust in me, Your Excellency. Speaking of the Bigfeet, I am proud to also tell you that last month we conducted some training with them. In the event of attack, we believe that we can communicate our request for help to our sometimes invisible and hard to understand friends and get their help. Their size and fierceness will be used to our advantage.”

“Good. Very good. The agreement that we struck with those creatures was quite stunning. To think that in order to not only avoid future attacks, but also to gain an ally, all we had to do was provide them with a constant stream of candy canes. And they are so easy to make, even now with the shortages,” Santa said to General Bygone. “That was genius work by Santa.”

Santa and the General walked to a conference room in a little house and met with other military commanders, including lesser army officials and Admiral Grey Goose of the North Pole Navy.

“Gentleelves, we need more labor. We cannot have our elves slaving away in camps to produce these toys. It hurts morale against my government. Everyone loves Santa. But I cannot stand that thought that anyone might harbor evil thoughts about my Prime Minister or military officials. And we need more resources. Neither can I stand the thought that good children will not get the toys that they deserve this Christmas,” Santa stated as he addressed the five officers present.

“I agree completely with your assessment, Your Excellency,” Admiral Goose stated. “We have stepped up patrols around Ireland. But abducting Leprechauns has gotten more and more difficult over the last few years. The Leprechauns have stepped up their own patrols on the seas and on the beaches. After some of our elves were caught and tortured last year by those vile creatures, the elves have been less excited about their duty, though they know that it is important. I will try to encourage them. And we will step up operations.”

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“About how many Leprechauns are we getting a month now?” Santa inquired.

“Averaging about ten, which is down from two years ago, but up slightly from last year,” the Admiral replied.

“And how are they lasting in the camps?” Santa asked Captain Moxo Spring, the army officer in charge of camp security.

“Not so well around this time of year. This year we have lost ninety Leprechauns, just half of them since September when production was picked up. Of that ninety, about half committed suicide or died trying to escape. The other half did not survive the reeducation camps I have been running. But the Leprechauns who have survived are mostly productive, making toys at a good rate. Even the ones who have lost fingers or even limbs have been brought back into production,” the Captain stated.

Santa looked a bit distressed. “We are losing that many? We are losing them too quickly. You know the purpose of these camps is not to kill the Leprechauns, but rather to make toys. And if they are too busy dying then they can’t be making toys.”

“Your Excellency,” the Captain said in his defense, “slave labor is not usually productive. Making them work is difficult; maybe we need to think about new solutions.”

There was a bit of silence in the air. No one else could believe that this young officer had challenged Santa, even in this indirect way.

Santa’s red face got redder. He looked directly at the officer and said, “You will make it work. It has been working for the human leader Josef Stalin. It will work for me!”

“Of course he will make it work,” General Sam Bygone said as he gave a dirty look to Captain Spring, who looked undeterred. “I think the Captain was just expressing the view that we need to step up abductions and that is something we are all on board with. If need be the army will provide more support to the naval forces in their midnight raids off the coasts of Ireland,” the General stated.

“Gentleelves, I wonder if we are being too short sighted just looking at Ireland for labor. I know that Northern Ireland and Britain is too well protected by the United Hidden People’s Navy and beach patrols, but there are elves in Greenland and Iceland. Their coasts are not well protected,” Santa said.

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There was again silence for a moment. Santa looked at all of them and said “Well?” expecting a response.

“Your Excellency,” Admiral Goose respectfully said, “we trade with the hidden folk of those nations. Without their supplies we could not make any toys. We could not make candy canes for the Bigfeet. We cannot attack them. They are friends.”

“But who is to know if in the middle of the night we abduct some of the elves there and bring them back here?” Santa asked.

“Your Excellency, they would find out. These operations are done at night, but we are still sometimes spotted. Besides, I don’t believe my elves would want to abduct their fellow Christian elves, even if they are heretical Lutheran elves” the Admiral said.

“The elves love Santa. If I tell them to do it they will. If I tell them that the elves in those countries are conspiring against us then they will act. And we can still steal enough supplies from our raids to keep our operations going,” Santa argued.

“Your Excellency,” General Bygones stated, “all of us elves love you more than life itself. But many also have friends and even extended family in Iceland and Greenland. The Leprechauns are an ancient enemy, but the Christian elves there are ancient friends. Besides I do not believe that it is strategically sound for us to do that. Intelligence collected from our spies indicates that the Leprechauns are attempting to form alliances against us with local powers. The elves of England and Iceland are reluctant to join any such crusade, but abducting elves from Iceland or the few in Greenland would surely cause them to change sides. We cannot risk this. Alone the Leprechauns are not a terrible force. Even with some support from their allies the trolls of Germany they could be successfully defended against. But if the United Hidden People of Britain and Northern Ireland were to join with our foes then we would be in a very dangerous situation.”

“Realpolitik, that is what it always comes down to,” Santa sadly said. “Where are we to get workers from?”

“Your Excellency, if I might,” Captain Spring said as everyone else in the room looked at him in contempt and shock that he had the nerve to speak again. “If perhaps we made conditions more tolerable in the production camps perhaps we could get local elves to volunteer there for work. Sure we would drain some elves from the military,

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but if we stop abducting creatures from Ireland then perhaps we won't need a military that is quite as big, and we won't have to worry about invasion. Either that or perhaps we could pay hidden folk from the neighboring lands to work in our plants. We could get money to pay them by selling some of our toys, instead of giving them all away," the young army officer said.

Before Santa could respond, General Bygone stepped in nervously. "Your Excellency, you will have to forgive the boy. He is young. He doesn't know what he is saying. He is too young to understand how the Leprechauns have conspired against all Christian elves and all the Christian people of Europe for centuries. He simply does not understand the necessity of our war against them. He is an idealist. He was educated in England. His father was an ambassador there you know. He picked up some crazy ideas from the English. But I assure you that if you leave him under my continued guardianship he will cease speaking or even thinking such absurd thoughts!"

Santa just sat quietly for a second, looking at the General and Captain. He did not look happy. "The elf does look young, General. I wonder how he made his rank so quickly. Raw talent and hard work, I suppose. General, see that you do reform him or he shall stay young forever," Santa said as he stood up and walked out of the room.

As the young Captain was figuring out that Santa had just threatened his life, General Bygone looked at him and said in a harsh tone: "Keep your mouth shut, or you'll be thought of as a subversive. You know what happens to them."

The young officer put his head down.

Chapter 4

Santa left his elves in the military to devise plans to bring in more workers, and headed to his executive office, which was located in the center of the Santa City, not too far from his residence. Santa City was the smaller of the two cities in the North Pole. Christmas City, which was about a half-mile away, held the bulk of the population and the Cathedral.

Arriving at his desk, he saw a slip of paper awaiting his signature. It made him sad.

“I never enjoy this part of the job. The only part that Santa likes less is ordering the bodies of the suicides to be disposed of outside the State. But I suppose it is necessary, no matter how sad it is,” Nick said to himself as he sat in his office alone.

He picked up the piece of paper and read it to himself, “On September 12, 1939 after being found guilty of heresy for denying the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and the divinity of Christ, it is the sentence of Santa’s court that Fluber Cones, an elf, be sentenced to death.” Santa held the piece of paper. He knew the judgment was sound. A judge of his own choosing, who served at his pleasure, had rendered the verdict. A credible witness, a member of Santa’s secret elf police, had testified from behind his screen that the young elf had on three times denied the Holy Trinity and the divinity of Jesus. The police agent had no reason to lie, Santa assured himself. He was just doing his job. Santa picked up his pen, dipped it in ink, and initialed the piece of paper. Then he placed it in his outbox.

“’Tis tough, I know. Santa mourns for the young man and his family. Santa hopes that the young man converts to the true faith. But I cannot allow him to spread his heresy and to jeopardize the spiritual health of this community. Heretics cannot be allowed to distribute

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their poison, to endanger the souls of this community, especially the young ones,” Santa argued to himself.

Within a week or two Santa knew what would happen. The young elf would be taken to the town square. Santa would be there, of course, and the young elf would be given a chance to recant. If the elf recanted his heresy and asked for forgiveness then Santa would administer the last rites. The elf would then be straggled and his body burned. If the elf did not recant, then he would be burnt alive. Santa viewed that as somewhat humane in that he was preparing the elf’s soul for Hell so it would not be so traumatic.

There was a knock on the door. “Come in,” Santa said.

“Your Excellency, Santa,” an elderly looking elf said as he opened up the door.

“General Spacian,” Santa said to his head of intelligence, General Tymmy Spacian.

“So good to see you again, sir,” the general said as he entered Santa’s office. He was comfortable talking with Santa as they had worked together for so long.

“General, you don’t know how much I look forward to our daily meetings. You are the highlight of my day,” Santa said in a friendly if not deferential way.

“And of course it is the highlight of mine as well. It gives me great pleasure to be allowed to serve the Kingdom of God and the State of the North Pole in such a fashion,” the General said as he smiled and started to sit down.

“What do you have for me today?” Santa asked.

“We have developed information that an elf by the name of Tavis McGee, who works in candy cane manufacturing, has made statements against your rule,” the general said as he opened his notebook.

“Tell me more. Tell me more,” Santa insisted.

“One of my spies overheard him say, ‘It is a shame that we do not get to elect our leaders like they do in England and Iceland.’ Others around him assured him that Santa appointed the best elf ministers to run his government and to assure the freedom of the Catholic religion and the stability of the State. The elf then questioned why there was not freedom for other so-called Christian sects,” the general stated.

Santa sat quietly for a moment. He looked very disturbed by this. “Is this opinion spreading?”

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“No, all other reports indicate that the other elves not under investigation are completely loyal. Other elves would not sit with this particular elf during the lunch break at the factory.”

“Good. Keep him under investigation. I don’t want to be rash in my decisions. Maybe it was just an ill-thought-out remark and nothing more. But keep watching him. And if another statement can be obtained from him that is also subversive, then have him arrested, conduct a trial, and have him shipped to the toy production factories. If his family complains then have all of them put into production as well. Advise me of further developments regarding him,” Santa sternly said.

“Your Excellency, we will do that as usual. Again the other elves not under investigation appear loyal. Yesterday afternoon I did have to have one family, which was under investigation, shipped to production due to a similar circumstance. Some of the neighbors and extended family of the elves were concerned, but accepted our explanation that the elves in question were working with the Leprechauns to overthrow our society, to rape our women, to enslave our children, and to kill those of us who would not convert to paganism. They were not just mollified, but rallied behind our decision,” the general stated.

“Good general. Good. I also want you to keep an eye on Captain Moxo Spring who is in charge of security at the camps. He has questioned our abducting of Leprechauns and has just argued to me that we ought to pay for our labor. Insane, I know, but also troubling. Maybe he was not thinking clearly today due to lack of sleep or a hangover. But please watch him,” Santa stated.

“I have only heard good things about the Captain, Santa. And I see that he runs a tight operation. He is not afraid to rule with an iron fist and to be ruthless with dissident elves or Leprechauns in the production line. But even the apparent hard liners can be subversives. I will keep an extra good eye on him. I assure you of that,” the General said as he smiled.

“Very good. If that is all then please return to your work,” Santa said.

“I will, Santa. I hope that you have a blessed day,” the general said as he got up, smiled, and walked out of the room.

“You as well,” Santa said as the general left the room.

Alone for a few moments, Santa again reflected on the Christian society that he had built in the North Pole.

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“Surely when Christ Jesus returns to this earth, in His own good time, he will logically descend first here, as it is closest. And seeing our civilization, the civilization that I have founded, He will be well pleased. And then I will relinquish my earthly and spiritual governorship in favor of His Kingship. And the elves and I shall build a fitting throne for Him. And from it we shall all bow down and worship Him as equals while He restores to the rest of the world God’s Kingdom on Earth,” Santa stated to himself.

“And He shall rightly be pleased with the state that we have already established. We have taken it upon ourselves, though we be small in number, to punish the enemies of the faith, especially the Leprechauns. We have used the resources we have acquired to spread good Christian cheer on earth. We have cherished the children as he did. We have established a just society where all are free to practice faith in Him. We have punished those who have lied about Him. We have treated all our good elves fairly and have paid them just wages. Yes indeed, He shall be well pleased with me and with my loyal elves.”

Santa paused for a moment. Then there was a knock at the door a few seconds later. Santa knew who it was. He was just on time.

“Come in,” Santa said.

“Your Excellency. It is such a pleasure to lay my eyes upon you once more. You continue to radiate the love and wisdom of Christ as much today as yesterday and all the other days of your life. I seek your guidance as I do every working day,” the elderly elf said as he entered.

“Mr. Prime Minister, it is indeed a pleasure to see you again, sir,” Santa said to Prime Minister Yef Tinker. Old St. Nick had selected Yef as prime minister from the selected Elf Parliament five years ago. The prior prime minister was sent, along with his family, to make toys due to his inability to get the results that Santa demanded.

“Your Excellency, I appreciate your time so much,” he said as he sat down at a chair in front of Santa’s large oak desk.

“Labor. I want to know what is being done to get more labor,” Santa tersely said.

The elf appeared more nervous and fumbled around with his notes for a moment. Then he looked at them for a second and said with a tremble, “Yes, well, I had an opportunity to speak with Admiral

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Goose and General Bygone after you spoke with them. They advised that they are stepping up raids. They indicated that there were islands off the coast of Ireland that perhaps had some manpower, but less protection, so they are going to try to hit those places next.”

“Good. Very good. Resources. What are you doing about resources?” Santa demanded.

“As you are aware many of our resources come from the military raids in Ireland where we take wood, iron, and any gold that we find. We have tried and tried, but cannot find any natural reliable resources up here that we can use to trade with on a regular basis. With imported sugar we are able to produce more and more candy canes each year, and we trade them for resources. We continue to receive some humanitarian aid from our friends in England, Iceland, and Greenland. In addition, there has been an increase in Santa impersonators appearing at stores around the Western world, and from these stores we have received commissions. At present this is not a major source of income, but may grow as Christmas becomes more secularized. We have increased purchasing power, there is no doubt about that. But with humans, trolls, and Leprechauns causing war, and the fear of war across Europe, the price for supplies has increased dramatically. So for the short term we face some bumps in the road. But the long term forecast looks good,” the elf argued.

“I must hand it to you, Prime Minister Tinker, you put the best spin on it as possible. But too many deserving children are not going to receive toys this year due to our inability to cope with changes. I know that that is not the fault of Santa. I do everything possible. Others must be failing,” he said as he looked directly at the elf and grimaced.

The Prime Minister started to look concerned. He was wise enough to know that Santa wanted to blame someone and he had to come up with someone to blame, or else he would be blamed.

The Prime Minister paused for a second and then came up with the following. “Your Excellency. I am afraid that the Leprechauns, and their friends the trolls, are not the only enemies of freedom and Christianity. I fear that members of my own government are spies and traitors, and that they have been causing the problems in production. I assure you that if I am given the opportunity to clean house, then production will return to satisfactory levels in a few short years.”

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“A few short years? Why so long?” Santa inquired.

“Your Excellency, these traitors being so high up in command have caused such damage that I believe we will sadly need that amount of time to fix the problems. I had not informed you before of these traitors because up until this week I did not know of them. But if you allow me to expunge them then I will be able to revive our production,” the elf stated. He hoped that by falsely condemning a few lesser ministers he could buy himself a year or two to improve production. He hoped that by then the levels would be back to normal due to the ending of the wars.

“I am concerned that this was not noticed by you earlier and still has not been detected by General Tymmy Spacian,” Santa said as he looked very concerned.

“Your Excellency. I’m afraid that the General did not inform you of it because he is one of the conspirators,” the Prime Minister boldly asserted.

Santa looked stunned.

“What evidence do you have of this? He has served me loyally for decades,” Santa angrily stated.

“I overheard him saying that you were the Anti-Christ and that Christ would destroy you and your State when He returned. He said that the Leprechauns were the ‘Scourge of God’ to punish the elves for supporting you. I swear it is true,” Yef Tinker said as he sweated heavily.

Santa sat and looked up at the ceiling. He was stunned. “I can’t believe it. He is loyal. He is loyal,” Santa mumbled.

“Your Excellency, I wish it were not true. But it is. I have heard him with my own ears. He has become corrupted by power,” the elf prime minister argued. “He has not turned in disloyal elves and he has betrayed the most loyal. He must be stopped. I predict that after he and the other conspirators are removed we can return to normal working capacity in less than two years. They have done much damage, but we can recover if we remove them now before it is too late.”

Santa, still stunned, just stared at the wall for seconds on end. Then he responded. “Mr. Prime Minister, these are serious accusations. I appreciate you raising them. At this point we must be patient and observe the situation,” Santa calmly stated.

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“But they are selling our battle plans to the Leprechauns and trolls. They are betraying loyal elves. This is not a time for patience,” the elf Prime Minister stated. “Give me the authority to remove them and I will restore loyalty and order to this Christian community.”

“Just go. Just go. I must think on it,” Santa said as he stood up and pointed to the door.

The Prime Minister walked out, unsure if he and his family would be honored or sent to the production camps.

Santa sat alone and pondered the situation. He thought that everyone in his government was loyal that year. He had hoped that there would be no need for a purge. He didn't know whom to believe. He was troubled about what to do. He asked himself if he could afford to be wrong.

Chapter 5

Santa has pillaged our shores,” yelled Fargis McGee, the leader of the Associated Leprechaun Clans of Southern Ireland. “His elves have abducted our children, raped our women, and killed our old men. They have stolen our gold. Santa and his elves must be stopped and they must be stopped now!”

The Leprechauns are a type of elf. They tend to have red hair, although some have golden blond hair. They tend to have blue eyes. All, as the name would suggest, are followers of the Leprechaun religion.

They worship Lepres, the Leprechaun god who they believe leaves them buckets of gold at the end of rainbows. They had some good reason for this belief in their deity, as they did tend to find pots of gold at the end of rainbows in Ireland. That was what mainly kept their rural economy going. Lepres was at one time a common elf in the first century A.D. But after he fell into a bog that was just struck by lightning, he gained supernatural powers. He was able to levitate, heal the sick, and create gold. He usually used his power for good, but sometimes did sneaky and bad things with his powers, such as steal from other elves. After a while he tired of living on earth, the Leprechauns asserted, and ascended into Heaven where he smote the other gods and established himself as the only deity left. The other Irish elves decided to change their name to Leprechauns out of respect for their fellow elf, who had ascended so high. They dressed like him, wore his trademark green outfits, and sought after his gold. Of course, other elves did not accept that Lepres had defeated the other gods. Some contested that Christ was the true God and that Lepres had no supernatural powers. But most elves in Ireland converted.

Things for the Leprechauns went reasonably well, if you didn't mind occasion civil wars between Leprechaun tribes seeking power,

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until the twelfth century when elves, gnomes, and fairies from Great Britain started to invade. They stated that they were on a religious mission to convert the heathen Leprechauns to the true faith, Roman Catholicism. After the Reformation in the sixteenth century, the mission changed to convert Leprechauns to Protestantism. Some of the Leprechauns had converted or reverted to Christianity, but most had not.

The British hidden folk used this as justification to take Leprechaun lands and many Britons settled in the northern counties of Ireland. The elves, gnomes, and fairies came over on the boats of the human settlers from Britain who wanted to subdue the human inhabitants of Ireland.

Much resentment had built up and by the early twentieth century war had broken out in Ireland between the Leprechauns and the others. Some Leprechauns went overboard in their attempts at freedom, slaughtering whole families of elves, gnomes, and fairies while they slept. Leprechauns who had rejected this sort of violence and who attempted to work with the other creatures through the British democratic system, which had developed over several centuries, were also brutally slaughtered by the nationalistic Leprechauns.

This caused about thirty percent of the Leprechauns to actually side with the elves, gnomes, and fairies from Great Britain. By the early twentieth century the Leprechauns were represented in the British Hidden Parliament, which met under the floor of the human British Parliament, and had equal rights in hidden folk law. The Leprechaun nationalists, on the other hand, had no firm commitment to equality or democracy.

After a long and brutal war, a compromise was reached in 1920. The Leprechauns could have their own nation in the lower twenty-six counties of Ireland. The British would continue to rule in the upper six counties of what would become Hidden Northern Ireland. This caused some additional unrest, but by the 1930s things had calmed down.

The Leprechauns never developed a system that was fully democratic or overly concerned with civil rights. The Leprechauns had tribes or clans. The strongest in each clan would then go to Dublin, where the clan leaders would elect a national leader, who had strong executive powers. Most Leprechauns were satisfied with this

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arrangement, and if they weren't they tended to go north to live under the democratic regime.

Fargis McGee, who had been the Leprechaun head leader for about two years, was not speaking unpopular things when he condemned Santa. They hated the old man and his army of elves, as Santa's followers abducted their family and friends. Sure the Leprechauns in Ireland were sometimes harsh in dealing with Christian elves and fairies. And there was an occasional Leprechaun who would murder a human Christian child in her sleep, but most Leprechauns weren't like that. Most just minded their own business, collected gold, drank alcohol, and traded with other creatures.

"We have an army ready of about seven hundred and fifty troops. We are working on forming an alliance with the German trolls and if possible with other elves who resent Santa's mistreatment of their brothers," Fargis continued.

Standing in a green field with a tree stump as his podium, he went on to remind his audience of Leprechaun clan leaders and their invited guests of Santa's history, as they spun it. "Santa, once a holy man, under the name of Nicholas, left his home in Asia Minor after he was resurrected ten days after his death. He traveled to Holland where he lived in relative obscurity. He was then known as a gentle man who gave gifts to children. Sometime during the Protestant Reformation he changed. At night he would go out in the streets and murder Protestant humans. He would sometimes set fire to their churches, and it was even alleged that he abducted several Protestant children and beat and raped them until they renounced their faith," Fargis paused for dramatic effect.

He continued, "Before justice could catch up with him, he set sail on a sailboat one dark winter night. Without proper navigational tools he ended up at the North Pole where for the first time he was able to see hidden creatures. I suppose because there was nothing else for him to see and no where for them to hide. The creatures he found were elves, originally from the British Isles who had left due to the persecution of their faith, Catholicism. Santa, as a bishop, was able to serve their spiritual needs, especially since no elf priests survived to the exile. Santa was soon corrupted by his absolute power. By the mid-1700s, Santa had set up a puppet government to relieve himself of all of the day-to-day responsibilities of the government. With an agreement

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with the Bigfeet of North America, Santa was able to secure a flying sleigh and flying reindeer. At this point, Santa started the modern tradition of visiting Christian houses each year for Christmas. To secure labor to make toys he would purge his government and society at large from time to time and send the victims, which included anyone suspected of treason and his family, into camps to make toys. Realizing that his population of elves was limited and that he couldn't afford to put a disproportionate number of his elves into slave labor, Santa started his war against us Leprechauns. He used some real and many invented abuses by our kind to justify abducting our citizens at random and stealing our resources. Since the 1700s he has kidnapped over 10,000 Leprechauns. Given the normally long life expectancy of hidden creatures it is likely that many of these are still alive. But many have also died from exposure, homicide, and suicide. We believe that currently at least 5,000 of our brother Leprechauns are slaving away in Santa's work camps."

Fargis paused again, and then raised his voice. "And it is our job to free them!"

The crowd roared. The Leprechauns jumped up and down.

"We have built up our forces. We have trained our men. We have built our sailing ships. We need an alliance. We are a brave people, but we cannot afford to send any more than seven hundred and fifty Leprechauns abroad and still provide a reasonable homeland defense of our country. But I am confident that with our friends in Germany, and possibly with allies elsewhere, we will prevail. Santa's forces stand at about fifteen hundred-to-two thousand elves. We know that he has trained non-combatants in the deadly arts as well. But I am confident that once we start an invasion, we will be welcomed as liberators by many of the elves. And they will turn on Santa. And order will be restored to their country. We will free our loved ones! And we will reclaim our resources!"

Again, the crowd roared. One clan leader stood up and offered a toast to Fargis McGee. "To our brave leader, who shall slay Santa and end his evil reign!" he cried. Everyone else again cheered.

"Let us hear more from our fellow Leprechauns," Fargis decreed.

An old female Leprechaun wearing a green sweater and holding herself up with a cane that was bent out of shape, walked up to the podium.

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“One hundred years ago my two darling boys were playing on a field in Cork one evening. And they never returned. We searched far and wide for them. We searched for years. But we knew it was all in vain. Santa’s ships had been spotted off the coast that night. We had to conclude what the awful truth was. I have prayed to Lepres for his help. I know that he hears my prayers. And he has told me that my sons are still alive slaving away in Santa’s workshop. And he has told me that one day our nation would set them free,” she said as she cried.

Everyone was moved by her statements.

Other speakers also spoke about personal traumas. And some even talked about the history, mentioning that before the revolt establishing their nation, the Hidden People’s Navy did little to protect their shores. And since the formation of the new government defense ships had not been built up fast enough, but they were now building a proper navy at great speed.

After two hours the business was concluded. It was getting toward the evening. The Leprechauns concluded their business and went off to drink.

Chapter 6

The trolls of Germany had a population of ten thousand, which was much greater than the five thousand Leprechauns in southern Ireland or the now almost four thousand elves of the North Pole. Organized before in small principalities, one leader, General Hans Frei, a brutal and troubled troll, managed to gain control over the land.

Not of noble birth, but rather a simple bridge troll's son, Hans showed brilliant leadership skills once he joined the militia of a local troll noble in Hamburg. Hans rose through the ranks of the noble's militia to become its highest ranking officer. After a decisive battle against another local noble where Hans proved himself an excellent tactician and demonstrated great personal courage, Hans became deeply popular with not just the citizens of Hamburg, but with many in Germany.

After the local troll noble became involved in a scandal with another male troll, General Hans Frei spent some of his political capital and arrested the noble, his boss, for sodomy. This happened in 1848. He then had himself named the leader of Hamburg.

His government was more efficient, especially since government workers who were lazy were executed, their heads put on spikes. The troll nobles of Germany feared this troll and worried about their own grips on power. Most of the common trolls admired him. They liked the fact that he rose from nowhere to become powerful. They liked the fact that his system of government produced results. And they especially liked his calls for the trolls of Germany to unite as one nation. The trolls were never able to unite before, and many felt that as a united troll nation they could become a world power among the hidden folk.

Later in the year 1848, the wars started. By 1850 almost all of hidden Germany was united under the command of General Hans Frei.

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Trolls were not the only hidden creatures to inhabit Germany, but they were the majority. Elves, gnomes, and some fairies also lived there. Despite the fact that they were few in number and not much of a threat, General Hans did not trust them, especially since so many gnomes, fairies, and elves had served as advisors to many troll nobles. Therefore, General Hans issued an edict: The non-troll hidden creatures could either leave their homes or face certain death. General Hans was condemned by other hidden governments because of this. Santa, for example, issued a statement calling for the overthrow of Hans Frei and his government. But Hans stayed in power. The troll nation was well armed and powerful. The other creatures left Germany by and large. Those who were brave enough to remain were mostly slaughtered in order to preserve “troll purity.” It was rumored that a few survived and continued to live in their homeland in hiding, with the help of some local dissident trolls. But most trolls firmly supported the decision and General Hans. The trolls looted the properties of the expelled or killed creatures.

Next Hans used his political capital to curb the Christian religion. This was a less popular measure. He shut down many troll churches and had many troll priests arrested on trumped up charges. General Hans encouraged a religion he invented that was inspired by the faith of their troll ancestors in the pre-Christian time. This so-called religion called war the highest sacrament and condemned unnecessary charity. Its adherents grew every year.

With this new religion, Trollism, Hans threatened war on his neighbors. By the early 1900s, he had brought the creatures of Austria, Poland, and what is now the Czech Republic under his command. He engaged with battles with gnomes from France over certain towns and was mostly successful.

His trolls were slightly taller and stronger than most other hidden creatures. And while most elves, gnomes, and Leprechauns fought with wooden sticks, Hans’s trolls had the ability to produce sharp iron swords, shields, and armor. They were a force to be reckoned with and every hidden nation knew it.

“Santa is the enemy of Germany. He travels the world spreading his message of Christmas cheer, charity, and faith in Catholicism. He pollutes the minds of all, even trolls, with this garbage. For years I have encouraged trolls to attack Santa as he visited the homes of

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Christian children. But so far, despite killing the occasional reindeer or looting his sleigh on occasional house visits, we have not succeeded in stopping him. Our friends the Leprechauns in Ireland, who have also been battling this menace, ask for our help. They tell my ambassador that Santa has been abducting their citizens for years to force them to make toys. This attack on our traditional allies in Ireland cannot be left unanswered any more," General Hans Frei said to a group of his advisors that he had gathered.

There was considerable discussion. A few felt that the trolls should not expend forces fighting in the North Pole, because they could be better spent traveling with Hitler's forces and assisting him while also expanding their own boundaries.

"I understand the desire to fight along side Hitler," General Hans stated. "He is a brave man. He is one of the few humans that I admire. But our allies need us too. Sending our men on an adventure to the North Pole will harden them up, make them more battle ready, especially in the extreme cold. And when they come back then they can help to build the new world order."

More debate ensued. Since the General made his intentions about going to war clear, the debate shifted to how many troops the Germanic trolls would be willing to send overseas.

General Hans, after listening to the half dozen advisors settled the manner by saying "We have five thousand trolls under arms. We can send one thousand to Ireland to prepare with the Leprechauns. It will leave us still with more troops at home than we really need. We are far more militarized than any of our neighbors. Only the Hidden Folk of Britain and Northern Ireland come anywhere close. These one thousand trolls along with the seven hundred and fifty that the Leprechauns promise should be more than needed to defeat the puny full time army that Santa has. Even if we take some losses in the journey to the North Pole, as is expected, we will still be victorious!"

"Our trolls are brave and strong. And although a few of you have raised concerns over the mythical Bigfeet that Santa allegedly uses for protection, I have never seen any proof of these creatures. And even if it does exist, it does not appear to exist in great numbers. Our trolls will defeat any such creatures!"

So, that early December 1939, General Hans ordered one thousand of his trolls to sail to Ireland to prepare for the battle against Santa.

Chapter 7

The elves of Iceland were a peaceable sort. They did not engage in battles to conquer other lands. They lived at peace with each other and with other hidden creatures, such as trolls and gnomes, who even more sparsely inhabited the island.

In the 700s the elves of England, Ireland, and parts of Scandinavia left their homelands in search of cheaper real estate. Most of these elves were opposed to the autocratic systems of government that they left behind so very quickly they established on the island a constitutional republic that granted civil liberties to all.

The population of Hidden Iceland was just under two thousand elves. There were only a few dozen trolls and gnomes. The Icelandic government was comprised almost completely of elves and was led by Prime Minister Halldor. There was an elected President, but his position was mainly titular.

In the early 1000s, some elves from Iceland had left seeking further adventure and even cheaper real estate and had established themselves in Greenland. Greenland, being a bitter cold and not green place (unlike Iceland, which is actually much more green than one would expect given its name), did not have great appeal to most hidden creatures. The three hundred elves of Greenland had their own government, but were in an alliance with the elves of Iceland.

The elves of Iceland and Greenland engaged in trade with the elves of the North Pole. In return for gold, which Santa's elves had stolen from the Leprechauns, the Icelandic and Greenlandic elves would provide wood, cloth, and food products like sugar, which was imported from Cuba. It was a comfortable setup for everyone engaged in the trade. There was, however, some moral outrage in Iceland because everyone knew where Santa's elves got their gold from.

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There was also concern over reports of the treatment of dissident elves. The Icelandic elves were mainly Protestant Christians. Their official religion since the 1600s had been Lutheranism. And everyone, especially the Lutheran elf bishops, were concerned over the death sentences that a handful of North Pole elves had received for endorsing Luther's doctrine. Also they didn't exactly like the anti-Lutheran and pro-Catholic tracts that Santa would leave with the toys that he gave to the Lutheran children. But this was much less intolerable than the executions.

In the fall and winter of 1939, the Icelandic government met to discuss the war clouds that were loaming over the world.

"I have received a communiqué from the government of Southern Ireland inviting us to join them in an alliance against Santa," Halldor, the Prime Minister, said to his cabinet.

There was grumbling from some of his ministers.

"They claim that they along with the German trolls will have a force of almost two thousand creatures ready to set sail from Ireland at the end of December or early January, depending on weather conditions. They claim that this is a war to free the elves who are being oppressed by Santa," Halldor stated.

"Elves being oppressed by Santa? And what about the Christian elves being oppressed by the Leprechauns? Or all of the creatures oppressed in Germany by the trolls? This is a sinister plan to take a Christian elf land. Santa is no saint, at least not anymore. But the Leprechauns and trolls are worse. If anything we should send this information to Santa and fight with him," Anna, the female elf in charge of Iceland's Elf Education Ministry, stated.

"I disagree," said Axel, the head of Iceland's Elf State Department. "The Leprechauns are still elves. They have suffered horribly as a result of Santa's actions. Many of them toil away still in Santa's labor camps. Countless Leprechauns have died there, we know from our sources. And Santa has oppressed our own brother elves in the North Pole. He had denied them liberty of worship. And he has ruled over them with an iron fist, denying elves the ability to govern themselves. We should not tolerate this human to rule over our brothers in such a cruel fashion. I will grant you that Santa was once a good man, but he has become corrupted by power. He is a threat to the world and he must be stopped!"

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“And the trolls, you are just going to let them into that nation of elves and let them slaughter the inhabitants? I don’t like Santa much either. But our brother elves are better off under him than under the trolls,” Anna argued. “They will kill all of the elves!”

“Santa is such a threat,” Axel said in a very serious tone, “I would be tempted to sign an alliance with the devil to defeat him.”

This caused a great stir in the cabinet and the elves yelled back and forth at each other.

“If we send in military specialists we can monitor the situation, free elf political prisoners, possibly remove Santa from power, and possibly resolve the situation,” Karl, the Secretary of Icelandic Elf War, announced.

“It is senseless to do nothing, to just allow elves to be slaughtered by trolls and Leprechauns. It is just as senseless to let our brother elves be oppressed by this dictator. We know that the elves from the North Pole that we trade with are brainwashed. They would kill a brother elf who so much as insulted Santa. But there are elves in the labor camps who would welcome us with open arms, perhaps as many as a thousand of them. An astonishing figure when we know that the population not in prison camps is about four thousand. There must also be dissenters in the population. And if we are able to capture or kill Santa perhaps his spell over the population will be diminished. We have special forces that are capable of this. We have secretly trained for years for such a contingency, as all of you know.” Karl argued.

“Yes. Yes. That is a good compromise plan,” Axel stated. “We should not go in along with the Leprechauns or trolls because we really can’t trust them. But in the event that the events on the battlefield turn against Santa, or even if not and we get the chance, we should be prepared to free our brother elves in the camps, to capture Santa, and to perhaps try to broker a peace agreement between the North Pole elves and the invading forces. Part of the agreement will involve the freeing of the Leprechauns. Hopefully that will pacify them and they will go home without destroying our brother elves. The trolls will be another force to reckon with. If need be we will fight against them if they attempt a slaughter of the North Pole elves. And hopefully if things get that badly out of control perhaps we can convince the Leprechauns to defend their fellow elves as well.”

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“Clusterfuck,” Anna said.

“I beg your pardon,” Karl replied.

“Did you idiots ever think about how crazy and poorly planned that sounds? You are going to send a small force of our elves to the North Pole. If the North Pole is successfully invaded, without coordination from the invaders, you are going to try to join the invasion to free the elves in the camps. Then you are going to try to capture and kill Santa, whom the elves up there love more than anything, and hope that you can get the North Pole elves to side with you. Then you are going to try to negotiate a treaty of peace, on behalf of the North Pole elves, with the back-stabbing Leprechauns and genocidal trolls? And if that doesn’t work you are going to hope that perhaps you can either fight the well-armed trolls yourself or somehow convince the Leprechauns, the long time allies of the trolls, to fight with you against the trolls? This is an insane plan. Poorly thought out. It is bound to bring disaster to our elves in the field if not to the elves here at home. We are better just staying neutral than trying this plan.”

Other ministers agreed with Anna and voiced their strong opposition. The discussion continued for hours. At the end a vote was taken. There were four choices: Send an army to defend the North Pole against invasion, send an army to join the invasion of the North Pole, remain neutral, or Karl’s plan of sending a specially trained force to monitor the situation and to take actions to topple Santa if the circumstances would allow it.

There were twelve ministers in the cabinet. Three voted in favor of defending the North Pole. None voted in favor of joining the Leprechaun/troll invasion force. Four voted in favor of neutrality. Five voted in favor of sending in military specialists to monitor the situation and to take appropriate action against Santa and his camps if possible.

The Prime Minister thanked everyone for his thoughts and vote. He then expressed his agreement with the plurality of his cabinet and asked Karl, the Secretary of Elf War, to take the appropriate steps to put the plan into action.

Halldor asked his ministers, even if they disagreed with the outcome, to remain silent about the deliberations and decision. “Secrecy is our best weapon. As far as either side is concerned we

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are not only neutral, but unconcerned. I understand that some of you disagree with this decision. But it has been made. And to expose any part of this risks putting our brave elves in the military at risk from all sides.”

The elves, even those opposed to the decision just taken, promised secrecy. Most walked out of the cabinet meeting, which was held inside a pile of rocks on a lava field, looking sad.

Chapter 8

The Bigfeet of North America were originally from Asia, but had lived in North America for thousands of years. Endowed with magical powers, they could hide themselves from other creatures. This led many to believe that they were not real.

Tall, and brave, these creatures were generally feared by others, especially by hidden creatures. The Bigfeet had attacked Santa and his elves many years previously. But this attack was halted and peace was reached after Santa promised them candy canes. Bigfeet were known to have a sweet tooth.

The Bigfeet responded to this favor by signing an alliance with Santa and by giving him a magical sleigh and magical reindeer to use. If a reindeer ever died they gave Santa a new one. The Bigfeet also planted some magical trees in the North Pole which would grow in the cold. This provided the elves with a small forest. It was a good relationship and both sides were happy with it.

“Grrrrr. Uhhh. Chuchu,” said President Pokamoka the then leader of the Bigfeet of North America.

“Hu, Huh, grrr,” said his Minister of War as he picked lint out of the President’s fur.

“Uggg! Uggg! Ugggg!” screamed the Minister for Bigfeet Magic as he beat his chest.

Pokamoka passed around the note that he had received from Santa’s ambassador. It was short and to the point. Santa knew that the Bigfeet did not have a good command of the English language (the language spoken by all other mythical creatures), or much patience. It read simply, “Candy canes for you. Thanks for magic reindeer sent last month. Troll ate one last year. Send many Bigfeet. Santa face attack. Troll come.”

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“Huto musshu,” Minister of Bigfeet finance said as he sucked on one of the candy canes and read the note.

“Ugg! Grrrr! Hout. Hout. Hout,” The Minister of War argued.

The President grunted several times, and the matter was decided.

Chapter 9

After many years of war and turmoil, the hidden creatures of Great Britain and Northern Ireland had put war and strife behind them. Each group of creatures had made peace within their own ranks and with the other creatures. To the extent that grievances or disputes still existed, the creatures decided to settle them through private mediation, the courts, and also through the democratic process. Free elections were held every few years. The creatures considered the human monarch to be their head of state, although he was unaware of this. It was a wonderful thing to behold.

The hidden people had a population of fifteen thousand, made up of mostly elves and gnomes in England. There were also other creatures such as fairies from Scotland and Leprechauns, who had refused to join the revolt in Ireland. This was where the creatures were concentrated, but it was not unusual, for example, to find a fairy living in England or a gnome living in Northern Ireland. There were a handful of trolls in the country, but not more than twenty.

The gnomes and fairies were generally smaller than the elves and Leprechauns (who remember are elves themselves who just happen to worship the god Lepres and who felt so strongly about it they decided to change their name), but the gnomes and especially the fairies tended to be more cunning, which made up for their lack of size and physical strength.

The Hidden Parliament met under the floor of the actual British Parliament to discuss the coming conflicts. The Prime Minister of the Parliament was Margaret Thatcher, who was half elf and half human. Bigger than most elves, she dominated the floor. Legend told that one day she would increase in size and become the human Prime Minister as well and free the people and elves of the Falkland Islands from the grip of a future Argentine human junta and an Argentine troll junta.

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“Members of Parliament. War clouds are all around us,” she started. “The trolls of Germany threaten the peace of this land. They have aligned themselves with the Leprechauns of Southern Ireland. Both nations demonstrate extremist ideologies. Elves, fairies, and gnomes have been driven from their homes and killed. Not unlike the human Germans, these creatures have aligned behind a dangerous and fanatical leader. This is not the only threat. Santa has continued to pillage the coasts of Ireland and but for our strong navy our own citizens might well be put at risk for abduction. Both sides in this conflict militarize and threaten the peace of the world.”

The audience broke out in mostly cheers, but some boos.

“How is it that the government compares General Hans and his Leprechaun allies to good old St. Nick who has graced the children of this isle with toys for generations?” an old looking elf on the opposite side of the aisle asked with indignation.

Thatcher stood up and responded, “Santa has oppressed his people. He has set up a theocratic state which is in opposition to all that we value. He has kidnapped helpless creatures. He is a threat. That we cannot ignore. Not as threatening to us as the trolls, I grant you, but we should not pretend that he is a saint.”

Again there were cheers and jeers.

“So where does His Majesty’s Government stand? Are we to join with the trolls to defeat Santa or join with Santa to defeat the trolls and Leprechauns?” asked another member from across the aisle. “Or are we to try to fight them all?”

Truth be told, the government didn’t have a position because there was no point to being involved. Many in government secretly said that it was a tragedy that it was a war that all sides couldn’t lose.

“Our policy is clear,” Thatcher responded. “We are to equip ourselves for every possible situation. We will not get involved unless our hand is forced. Santa, the trolls, and the Leprechauns of Southern Ireland are not our allies. They do not represent our values. We will not side with anyone, yet, but will wait to see the outcome before taking any action.”

“This is absurd!” yelled an opposition elf from across the aisle. “The enemies of Christianity and the enemies of elves are planning an attack on elf lands! We know what the trolls of Germany did to other creatures. We know General Hans Frei’s genocidal record. We know

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how the Leprechauns have treated other creatures, even their own who did not agree with them. Santa is not perfect, I grant you that, but we must continue dialogue with him, through our ambassador and through other channels to generate reform. But we cannot allow those elves, our brothers, to be butchered by these evil forces. We must take action!”

“The fact of the matter is we must retain our forces here and build them up to defend the homeland against possible attacks. I cannot risk these forces to defend a brutal despotic regime!” roared Thatcher.

A Leprechaun arose. Some of the older elves booed his mere standing to speak. Standing on the government’s side of the Parliament, he said, “I appreciate the protection given to Northern Ireland by His Majesty’s Hidden Creatures Navy. None of my constituents, nor any citizen from Northern Ireland, has been abducted by Santa’s criminal regime. We are very grateful. But I ask when the prime minister is going to address the enslavement of so many Leprechauns and her own elves in the North Pole? Quite frankly we must see that this coming conflict, which puts so many North Pole elves at risk, was only started by Santa’s insistence on abducting Leprechauns to work as his slaves. Perhaps if the government could negotiate with Santa to free these Leprechauns then perhaps the Southern Irish will back down and conflict will be avoided.”

“The government has been in discussions with Santa about reform. We continue those discussions and hope that they will bear fruit. We have instructed our ambassador to inform Santa about the intelligence we have collected about the trolls and Leprechauns arming for conflict. We hope that Santa will seek to change his ways and hope that perhaps by remaining neutral in this conflict we may serve as honest brokers to negotiate a treaty. We are not a war-like hidden people. We seek peace and justice,” Thatcher affirmed.

The debate raged on for several hours. Several votes were taken. The government was able to win support for its positions. They agreed to condemn Santa’s hidden people’s abuses. They agreed not to take sides in the dispute unless necessary, but to be willing to negotiate a peace treaty. Finally, they voted on a resolution for the hidden people of the islands to support the humans in any way possible in their battle against Hitler and his allies. There was a strong view that

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since war had already begun on this front it was their patriotic duty to help in any way possible. Many creatures had pledged to break into factories at night to help with the production of war supplies.

Chapter 10

Everyone hates Santa. At least it feels like that some days,” St. Nick said to himself as he walked around his house the evening of December 25, 1939.

“Kill myself delivering toys to children around the world. Work like a dog. Get back and want to rest, but instead find my country and my elves still threatened by evil creatures. And others still unwilling to help us,” he lamented as he sat in his favorite leather chair.

It was a sad time for the fat man. He should have felt happy. But it was all a let down. No one would think about Santa much for the next year, except of course the creatures who meant him harm.

“Maybe I should just end it all this year. Let the world see what it is like without me. They will all cry their eyes out. Christmas will be ruined. The elves will be slaughtered or enslaved by the Leprechauns and trolls. Evil will rule,” Santa said under his breath as he drank some vodka.

It had been a trying time for Santa. During the month he had to purge the top ranks of his military and government and send those elves, along with their elf families, off to work in the production camp. His prime minister would denounce as traitors some of his ministers and the heads of the army, navy, and intelligence. Those elves would in turn denounce the prime minister. It became extremely nasty, and Santa decided that he could not trust any of them. He instructed Captain Moxo Spring, who was in charge of camp security, to arrest all of them and their families.

Santa suspected that this was all started by the prime minister, who fabricated these charges against his other ministers and officials, so Santa ordered that Prime Minister Yef Tinker be tortured on a regular basis. It was a sad sight as every other night a body part would be slowly and painfully amputated from the once so highly

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esteemed elf. They started off slow, cutting off toes and fingers. Yef Tinker was not only driven mad before he managed to kill himself, but so were many of those who heard his screams.

Santa was also sad because he was not able to deliver as many toys as he wanted to this year. He dealt with this by first only leaving toys for the practicing Catholic children. Protestant children, as well as the children of lapsed Catholics, received presents only haphazardly.

What caused Santa the greatest concern was the reports that he heard all through December that the German trolls and Southern Irish Leprechauns were now seriously preparing an invasion of his territory with the goal of deposing him. They had talked about it for years, but the intelligence indicated that the plans were actually being initiated this time.

Santa had sent a note requesting help from his ally the Bigfeet. He was not sure of their response because his diplomats had a hard time figuring out what the creatures had said. Their language consisted of grunts and other noises like that, and were not easy to translate. The Bigfeet only knew a little English. Santa wasn't even sure if his message was completely understood, although he tried to put it in simple words that they would likely understand.

Santa had instructed his ambassadors in Iceland, Greenland, and the Hidden Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to request military aid. To his great disappointment, these governments rejected his request. He was at least relieved that they had committed to stay neutral, but quite angry over the denunciations of his government by the British hidden government. "Damn elves! Can't trust them to run their own affairs!" he cursed to himself.

While the prisoners slaved away making toys, Santa had strongly encouraged his free elves to equip themselves for battle. He had told them that the invasion might start as early as Christmas if the enemy could set sail early enough. Santa was terrified that the enemy would attack when he was away giving out gifts. But he did trust the leadership of the new elf leader, General Moxo Spring, who assumed command of the entire elf military as well as the civilian government. Working closely under Santa's direction, General Spring oversaw the drilling of the then nearly two-thousand-strong elf homeland army. He also gave additional training to the female elves about how to defend their homeland using common household items. For his

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professional force of 250 elves in the regular army, Spring got them metal swords from his friends in England and Iceland, and drilled them extensively in military tactics.

Santa had somewhat distrusted Spring before due to some questioning comments he had previously made. But he later learned to trust Spring because during the most recent purge not one elf attempted to denounce Spring. Santa knew that Spring would do his duty, even if he might hold personal viewpoints that differed. This was better, in Santa's mind, than the others who harbored doubts in secret and who secretly worked against his regime.

Strolling alone in his large house that Christmas night, Santa walked up to his third floor and looked out a large window at the town below.

Santa's house was in the center of the North Pole's smaller city, Santa City. The bigger of the two cities, Christmas City, where the Cathedral was, had about three thousand free elf citizens. Santa City, which was about a half mile away, had about one thousand free elf citizens. In between the two cities was a small forest filled with the magical trees from the Bigfeet and a trail on which Santa and the elves often cross country skied. Also between the two cities and hidden behind the trees and mounds of ice and dirt was the production camp.

Santa preferred the quietness of Santa city, while most of the other elves preferred the activity of Christmas City. Still Santa did enjoy watching his elves and being around them on occasion. From his window his heart filled with joy as he saw elf families out in the street singing songs, eating candy, and drinking elf beer as they celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ.

Santa was tired. He had said Mass on Christmas Eve right before heading out with his reindeer. He and his reindeer worked tirelessly delivering toys and successfully escaping Leprechaun attacks in Ireland and troll attacks in Germany.

"This is what it is all about. Christmas cheer and protecting these creatures," Santa said to himself as he looked down at the happy elves.

His depression was lifted. There was a reason for him to live. He had to keep going, and he would keep going to defend his loyal elves. And against any foe he would fight, to the death if necessary,

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to defend his country and elves. He realized that he no longer would dread any coming invasion, if it came. He had faith in his General and his elves to defeat any enemy.

Feeling uplifted, Santa decided that he would continue the joy by issuing his traditional Christmas pardons and clemencies. He sat down at his desk in his upstairs study and reviewed the appeals. There were five elves on elf death row and thirty elves in regular elf prison. There were many other elves in the production camps, but they were not eligible for clemency in Santa's mind because they were traitors.

Of the five elves on elf death row, three were there for heresy. Santa could not pardon them or give them clemency because he feared that their ideas would poison souls. One was on elf death row for having relations with a reindeer. The last one was there for stealing a candy cane. Normally stealing a candy cane would only earn one a term of incarceration, but this was the elf's second offense.

Santa reviewed the pleas. He commuted the sentence of the elf convicted of bestiality to ten years without parole. He offered the thief a complete pardon. He had thought about only offering a pardon on the condition that the elf lose one of his hands, but realized that perhaps that was not in the true Christmas spirit. And besides, he reasoned, in the likely event of an invasion he wanted that elf to have both hands to fight with.

Reviewing the elves serving time, most were there due to theft convictions. A few were in prison for beating their elf wives immoderately. He commuted the sentences of half of the incarcerated elves to time served on the condition that they volunteer for the front lines in the case of an invasion. He cut the sentences of the other elves in half.

Santa then took his pardons and commutations, and walked to the center of Santa City where he announced his decisions to great cheer.

"There is no son of God but Christ, and Santa is his vicar to us!" yelled an elf in the crowd as the several dozen elves who had quickly gathered there expressed their delight.

More and more elves gathered as word spread that Santa was addressing the citizens. Eventually most of the town showed up and Santa gave a brief speech.

"We are a Christian people, and I am a Christian bishop. God

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dictates that I mix mercy with justice. To our brothers who have fallen we must be forgiving. But to the enemies of our country we must show no mercy. Train hard and keep watch. I wish it were not so, but the Leprechauns and trolls are coming. But we will defeat them!” Santa proudly roared.

The elves excitedly made noises of agreement and started to chant “Death to the Leprechauns! Death to the trolls! Long live Santa and the loyal elves of the North Pole!”

Santa smiled as the other elves smiled. But he did not hang around the scene too long. He was afraid of becoming too close to any of the elves. He wanted some distance. That added to his god-like mystique.

Going back to his home alone, Santa drank some more and then went to sleep on his sofa watching the fire in the fireplace.

Chapter 11

The third week of January 1940 had begun, and there was no invasion. Santa started to think that perhaps it was not going to happen. Still he encouraged General Moxo Spring to train the professional army and the home army. He had gotten more metal swords from England and Iceland by this point. He was encouraged by the fact that a few of the elves had spotted the elusive Bigfeet around the North Pole's forest.

"It ends here. This is Santa's final chapter," said Fargis McGee, the Leprechaun leader, to his second in command, as his armada of nearly one thousand seven hundred fifty trolls and Leprechauns landed on the shore of the North Pole. A handful of the creatures had died, mostly from falling off the ships, but the overwhelming majority was there ready to fight.

"We will finish them all, once and for all," General Hans Frei said to Fargis McGee.

And with those words the creatures began to disembark their tiny sailboats and headed toward Santa City.

The creatures trekked for several hours and were tired. Some were getting sick. And there was some tension between the Leprechauns and the trolls. Most of the trolls hated the Leprechauns because they were elves and, thus, an inferior species. Many of the Leprechauns resented and distrusted the trolls due to their actions in Germany. It was always an uneasy alliance built on the desire to destroy a common enemy, but for different reasons. Still, they labored on together toward the walls of the city.

Santa's elves on the walls spotted the force. The trolls took the lead charging the ice walls and cutting through them with their metal swords while their armor protected them against most of the elf projectiles. The trolls cut enough holes through the ice for them

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to enter the city. The Leprechauns followed behind with their army, mostly equipped with wooden sticks, although some had metal swords. None of the Leprechauns or North Pole elves had any armor.

Santa appeared in the city. Dressed in his bishop's garb he stood in the center of the town screaming out commands to his armed forces. General Moxo Spring led his elves in battle.

The attack did not catch Santa completely off guard. Although he didn't expect an attack that very day, he knew that something was still likely in the works. And he also suspected that the attack would be in the lesser-populated Santa City, since he was the target. His professional army was based in Santa City. Orders were sent for the elves of Christmas City to make the just less than half mile trek to Santa City.

Despite Santa's preparedness, the trolls were hard to defeat. With their metal swords and armor they were striking down elves left and right. The elves who managed to attack the Leprechauns were more successful.

The elves fought on and with much vigor. The battle at times appeared to be going Santa's way. But mostly it appeared to be going against him. Santa retreated to his house, where he oversaw the battle from one of his third-floor windows. Picking up another bottle of vodka, Santa drank and cursed the trolls for their toughness.

Moxo Spring fought with vigor and put himself personally at risk as he dived into the troll ranks swinging his metal sword with reckless abandon. His fellow elves encouraged by his example also fought with much personal courage.

Still elves were being struck down too quickly. Trolls were not falling quickly enough. Moxo Spring was too consumed in battle to notice. But Santa noticed from his window and he started to weep.

"Put your hands up, Santa," came a voice, a foreign elf voice, from behind.

Santa turned around and saw twenty Icelandic elves with body armor and metal swords in his room. Shocked, Santa put up his hands.

"The game is over. You will not oppress elves any longer," an Icelandic elf officer said.

Santa was in shock. He knew that Icelandic elves were not terribly supportive of him, but he did not expect a hostile action. And

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it shocked him generally to be spoken to in such a way, especially by elves. He put his hands up because he didn't know what else to do. A team of elves approached him putting shackles on his legs and cuffs around his hands before Santa could react.

Regaining his composure, Santa said in a sincere voice, "My fellow elves. I am not your enemy. You are mistaken. The trolls and Leprechauns out there seek to destroy us."

An elf put a sword to his throat and said "Silence, or we will kill you." The elves then led Santa out of the room and into another room where they posted guards. They knew that it was risky to take Santa out of his house while the battle was raging and the outcome was still very much uncertain. So they sat with their prisoner in isolation.

A team of twenty elves from Iceland had taken part on the mission to capture Santa at his house. Santa did not have any security guards protecting his property. His elves were all out fighting.

Meanwhile, a team of thirty Icelandic elves had invaded the production camp and attempted to free the elves and Leprechauns held there. But the Icelandic elves had to compete with elf guards, hostile prisoners who were still loyal to Santa despite their captivity, and also with invading Leprechauns and Leprechaun prisoners who didn't know what side the Icelandic elves were on. Bloodshed and confusion reigned there.

General Moxo Spring, unaware of Santa's fate, continued to battle bravely, but saw his force crumbling as the afternoon wore on. He started to think that it was hopeless, and prayed for a miracle.

Just when it seemed that the trolls and Leprechauns would break all lines of elf resistance, there was a primal scream in the distance. And three dozen seven to nine foot tall upright walking apes appeared over a hill holding tree trunks from Santa's forest.

"My gods," General Hans Frei said to himself as he looked at the creatures. "Bigfoot wasn't a legend. He is real!"

The trolls and the Leprechauns didn't know what to do. They had heard rumors that these elusive beasts supported Santa, but weren't sure if that was myth or reality.

The creatures wasted no time. Holding the tree trunks, the creatures stormed the city and fields. The North Pole elves just retreated to their homes so as not to get in the way of the monsters.

The Icelandic elves in Santa's house saw this and realized that

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they had to act. The Bigfeet would carry the day. They could not defeat the creatures. But they could defeat Santa. The ranking Icelandic elf in the house issued the command for Santa to be given an on the spot trial. One of the Icelandic elves said “Santa you are charged with crimes against elves and crimes against other hidden creatures. How do you plead?”

Santa replied. “I am Santa. I am the protector of the elves and a doer of God’s work! God will smite you and all of his enemies!”

“Your comments just now are themselves evidence of your guilt beyond any doubt. There is no need for additional testimony. Do you have anything to say before sentence is pronounced” the ranking Icelandic elf asked in a hurried manner as he realized that the goings on outside might effect his mission.

Santa just stared at these elves who had the nerve to stand up to him. He didn’t know what to say other than “I am an instrument of God’s love.”

“Very well,” said the ranking elf. “The sentence is death,” he said as he nodded to a lower ranking elf soldier who was standing behind Santa.

The elf picked up his sword and the other elves stood back. Santa didn’t even see it coming. Before he knew it, his head was on the floor.

Chapter 12

Elated at the developments on the battlefield, General Moxo Spring and his underlings, who were even more inexperienced officers, watched as the Bigfeet stormed about with their tree trunks wiping out trolls and Leprechauns by the dozens. The little creatures ran away as quickly as they could. They were too scared to put up any type of resistance to these massive hairy beasts.

The trolls and Leprechauns in their panic made their way to their boats, but before they could embark off the coast, the Bigfeet were able to slaughter most of them. A few hundred trolls and Leprechauns were able to get into their boats and sail away. But hundreds more were dead on the ice. Many had been killed by the elves, but most had been killed by the thirty some Bigfeet in less than an hour. These killing machines slowly walked back to Santa City after the last of the invaders fled the North Pole. Then they disappeared into the night.

“Three cheers for Santa and the Bigfeet,” General Moxo Spring said to the townspeople as they eventually made their way back onto the streets of Santa City. He did not fear for Santa’s safety. He just assumed that Santa was fine. Why wouldn’t he be, after all? No loyal elf in the North Pole ever contemplated Santa’s demise.

Fearing for the safety of the production camp, Moxo Spring ordered many of his men to follow him to the camp. He was surprised to find Icelandic elves, formally captive Leprechauns, and some formally captive North Pole elves battling with other North Pole elves and other captives who were loyal to Santa.

With his superior force, Moxo Spring was able to slaughter the Icelandic elves who were fighting and to return the Leprechauns and other elves to their cells. This took the rest of the afternoon, however.

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Arriving back in town, General Spring and his men were met by lamentations.

“Santa is dead! He was murdered!” cried an elf as others called out for vengeance.

The Icelandic elves who had carried out the execution of Santa had managed to slip away into the night right after they completed their deed. The Icelandic elves were the prime suspects because of their unexpected arrival at the production camp and due to the fact that some North Pole elves reported seeing them around Santa’s house during the battle.

The people cried out in complete despair. This man who was their link to the apostles, this man who was to usher in the return of Jesus Christ and peace on Earth, this man who was a living saint, was now dead. His head had been carried away by the perpetrators.

Moxo trembled as he realized the situation. He was in charge. He was the rightful leader of the elves. And now he could make the decisions. He was loyal to Santa and his policies. But now Santa was gone, and others had to be loyal to him and to his policies.

Still he wondered if his brother elves would accept an elf as their leader. And he wondered if, as he was so young, they would be able to trust him. He knew, after all, that although he held positions of power before he was just Santa’s puppet. And everyone else knew that as well. Regardless, it was the closest thing that the elves had to a leader. And so after visiting Santa’s corpse that night and saying a prayer for Santa’s soul, Moxo asked the people in the city to join him in the town square where he addressed them.

“My fellow elves. Tragedy has befallen us. Our leader has been so cruelly murdered. We don’t know who is to blame. We will have to investigate this. In the meantime, our land is now safe. The invaders have been run off. I call now for every elf to return to his home and to pray for the repose of Santa’s soul. With God we will avenge Santa’s death.”

With heavy hearts the elves returned to their homes to pray. Many elves returned to their homes in Christmas City and spread the word about Santa’s demise. There was weeping all evening and into the next morning.

General Spring went about consolidating his power. He appointed ministers and military officers. He held onto his position as the top

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general and prime minister, but then did something surprising. He called for elections. He then went one step further and ordered the release of all captive Leprechauns and elf political prisoners. His liberal education in England taught him that these actions by Santa were wrong and that change was needed.

In the coming weeks an election was held and General Spring was elected prime minister. He instructed his ambassador in London to seek an alliance with the Hidden Peoples there. An agreement was reached where the Hidden People of Great Britain and Northern Ireland would protect the North Pole elves against further attacks. They also signed an alliance against the trolls.

The investigation into who murdered Santa was concluded by late February 1940. Under pressure from Prime Minister Moxo Spring the commission concluded that Santa had been murdered by trolls. This covered up the fact that the Icelandic elves had done it, because Spring wanted to develop better relations with his fellow elves there. And in some respects he understood their actions.

With his new administration in power, General Spring was also able to negotiate a treaty with the Leprechauns. They were somewhat satisfied when the few hundred surviving Leprechauns were returned and grudgingly accepted Spring's apology for the abductions and all of the deaths of the Leprechauns.

North Pole Regained

Epilogue

Santa's reputation in the North Pole was sacrosanct before the invasion. But afterward, in the new spirit of freedom, many elves started to question whether or not he was a good ruler. To the masses there was little doubt of his holiness. He was a national hero. But to many of the younger elves and in certain circles he was much less popular. Debate went on for years and indeed still goes on in the North Pole about the first Santa.

In late March of 1940, Prime Minister-General Spring realized that another Santa was needed. Another dictator was certainly not wanted, but a constitutional Santa was thought by him and by many as a good idea. Spring realized that the North Pole elves wanted to have something bigger than themselves to believe in. And he knew that the world needed Santa as well. Christmas would not be Christmas without a Santa.

A commission was set up by Moxo Spring to find a suitable replacement. After many deliberations, the North Pole government sent a formal invitation to an Icelandic bishop, who was, like Margaret Thatcher, half human and half elf, to become the next Santa.

In March the invitation arrived at the door of Bishop Petur Pallson, a Lutheran, to serve as the constitutional head of the North Pole. The good bishop who was known throughout Iceland for his love of Christmas and generosity was a bit unsure at first. He was familiar with the first Santa's ruthless past, which was very recent. But he was aware of Santa's complete history, which included many good deeds. After talking it over with friends and family, the bishop decided that it would be good for him to accept the position in order to redeem the original spirit of Santa.

By late spring of that year, Bishop Petur had arrived in the

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North Pole. In accordance with the new North Pole constitution, he renounced dictatorship and promised to follow the laws laid out by the Elf Parliament. The Bishop was crowned as the new Santa during the summer Solstice. Other elf bishops, Anglicans from England, other Lutherans from Iceland, Catholics from France, and one Old Catholic bishop from Holland attended the ceremony. The new Santa stated that he would not renounce his Lutheran faith, but would respect the religious freedom of all. It was an astonishing thing to see, as a year before Lutheranism was punished with death.

General Moxo Spring resigned from the military and instead focused on his job as prime minister. During his administration he liberalized the banking laws allowing the North Pole to be a banking hub, especially for rich elves from Europe who wished to hide some of their assets. He also encouraged the candy cane industry to grow, and encouraged the elves to trade their goods on the open market.

Seeking charity from the hidden creatures of Europe, Prime Minister Spring sought donations to fund Santa's work. Because of many of the changes that the prime minister had put in place, the North Pole was no longer a pariah state and many creatures, even Leprechauns, found themselves happy to contribute money and toys. Christmas in 1941 was the most successful ever, with the new Santa delivering toys to every deserving child. It was the first time ever that one hundred percent coverage had been achieved.

Secure with their alliances with the Bigfeet and the Hidden People of the United Kingdom, as well as their good relations with Iceland and Greenland, and their stable relationship with Southern Ireland, the North Pole elves were free and happy. Although still technically at war with the Germanic trolls, the elves did not believe that those loathsome creatures would attempt another attack on their land.

In 1950, after signing a peace agreement with the trolls after their total defeat which was mainly brought about by the British hidden people, Prime Minister Spring retired to private life. He wrote his memoirs and toured about Europe on book tours. Many resented Spring's prior support for the old Santa regime. Some creatures even wanted him arrested and tried for crimes against humanity. But most were happy that he had brought about needed change and he was left unmolested.

The new Santa continued to reign as a constitutional monarch.

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He encouraged elf Catholic bishops to send elf Catholic priests to minister to the spiritual needs of his people. And he encouraged his elves to study for the priesthood in European elf seminaries, something the old Santa would never allow.

As time passed on, Bishop Petur, the new Santa, saw the developments of the Second Vatican Council. He appreciated its more liberal direction. But he did not appreciate the extreme leftward direction that his church, the Elf Church of Iceland, had taken in the 1970s. Still Bishop Petur would not yet convert to Roman Catholicism. Among other things he enjoyed chasing after elf and human women too much. But in 1984 he did convert to the Elf Old Catholic Faith, which was a schismatic Catholic group that rejected the First Vatican Council since it proclaimed Papal Infallibility, which the new Santa and the Old Catholics thought dangerous. The new Santa was also pleased that the Old Catholic Church allowed its clergy to marry. The elves of the North Pole were happy that Santa was at least converting to a faith that was more similar to theirs. They were happier still when, in 1990, Santa Claus finally settled down and married a local elf who became Mrs. Claus. And they were happiest when in 2005 Santa converted to Roman Catholicism after engaging in discussions and beer drinking with the new Pope. The Pope gave a special dispensation to Santa so that he could remain married and become a Roman Catholic bishop in good standing. Pope Benedict wore a Santa hat that year at Christmas to show his appreciation for the new Santa and for the elves of the North Pole.

The Easter Bunny Mystery

Hippitty hop hop, hippitty hop hop, the Easter Bunny is on his way!” sang the white rabbit George as he hopped down the old stone path through Rufftown on his way to the drop off Easter eggs for the children of Humanville.

Passing through Rufftown, a small city founded by dogs, was the most dangerous part of the Easter Bunny’s trip, but it was necessary. There was simply no other way for George to get to Humanville. And he had to get to Humanville in order to drop off Easter eggs that morning for the good Christian children who lived there.

“Hippitty hop hop, hippitty hop hop, the Easter Bunny is coming today!” the creature happily sang as he continued to hop through the town in the early morning hours of Easter Sunday. He had kissed his rabbit wife goodbye and took one last look at his surviving twenty rabbit kids before leaving the house the night before. He knew that there were risks involved with leaving Bunny City to head through Rufftown and into Humanville, but to him it was still worth it. His father and grandfather had both served as Easter Bunnies. Being the Easter Bunny was in his genes. When he first impregnated his lover, she knew that he would follow this risky vocation.

The days prior George collected all of the eggs that he could from his chicken friends. He then, with his wife and kids, painted the eggs. George remembered helping his father with the painting of eggs. It brought him great joy as a youth to be helping his father in this way. He hoped that one of his spawn would be inspired as he was to serve as the Easter Bunny.

No one competed for the job when it opened up last. The rabbits of Bunny City were as a whole not interested in taking such a dangerous job to serve ungrateful humans for little fiscal reward. They were too self-centered and they failed to see the bigger picture. But George

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wanted it. Not just because he was following a family tradition, but because he believed that the greatest happiness in life could only come from the selfless giving of himself for others. So in spite of the risks and despite the lack of money to be made, George happily ventured through Rufftown to Humanville to deliver eggs to good Christian children.

Of course as a rabbit, he had no understanding of Christian doctrine or any appreciation for the person of Christ. Still when he heard of the happiness that his eggs brought the children, he knew that it was worth it. And he also, more importantly, knew that his selfless acts protected his community. The human adults were not likely to invade Bunny City and to slaughter the inhabitants for food (as they had done in ages past) so long as such a charming creature was providing their children with Easter eggs.

“Hippity hop hop. Hippitty hop hop . . .” the Easter Bunny said before he stopped his singing. He heard barking in the background. He looked back and saw a dog in the window of a nearby house. He knew that something wasn’t right. He heard a hiss and his worst fears came to fruition. In the darkness off the path and a few feet away in the trees he saw a cat staring right at him with murderous eyes.

Usually the Easter Bunny had to worry about dogs in Rufftown, but over the past few years the cat population had boomed. And these creatures were often known to be more dangerous to rabbits.

George knew that he had a chance. He had outrun cats and dogs before. Without saying another word, he took off hopping at full speed. Not yet ready to drop his eggs, he retained the hope that he could avoid the cat and still deliver the eggs to the children.

The cat gave chase to the rabbit. The cat gained on George.

“Oh, this isn’t good!” exclaimed George as the cat took a swipe at him and came within less than an inch of hitting George. George realized that it was time to dump his cargo. Throwing his eggs back at the cat, George lightened his load and hopped for his life.

The eggs just missed hitting the cat. The cat was filled with anger that George had tried to hit him with the eggs, and this anger increased the cat’s speed. The cat took a giant leap and landed on top of the Easter Bunny.

“Please! Please, have mercy! I am the Easter Bunny!” George screamed as the kitty swung its claws at George’s neck and quickly ended his mortal life.

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* * *

“I WANT TO SMOKE CATNIP EVERY NIGHT AND SLEEP ALL DAY!” Edgar the cat loudly sang into his cell phone during the late evening hours of Holy Saturday.

“Mr. Edgar. Is that you again? Stop catnip dialing me!” the voice on the other end responded.

“You know what, Judge. I’ve always loved you. Loved you like a father. You’re like a father to me. Do you want to come over and smoke some catnip with me?” Edgar asked as he took another puff from his catnip cigar and right before he took another swig of brandy.

“We’ve discussed this before, Mr. Edgar. I am a dog. I don’t like catnip. Now please stop calling me. It is disturbing my wife,” replied the voice.

“Judge Sam, I have brandy over here too. Why don’t you and your wife come over and drink some? We can talk about the law. It isn’t too late. It is only ten p.m.,” Edgar mumbled.

“Mr. Edgar, you know that I enjoy your company and that I love you, well, like a son. But we can’t come over tonight. It has been a long week. I have to get up early tomorrow to exercise. That tail of mine is not going to chase itself. Now please stop catnip dialing me,” the judge said as he hung up his phone.

“Hope he didn’t mind that catnip dial,” Edgar said to himself as he took another puff on his cigar.

It was another boring evening for Edgar. Lacking social skills, he didn’t communicate well with people. But after he got some alcohol and-or catnip into his system, his inhibitions were lowered and he could reach out to others.

He knew that the Judge didn’t really mind his catnip dials. He had called at later hours and said crazier things to the Judge who never held it against him. They were friends. Judge Sam, a black and white mid-sized mutt, had taught Edgar while he was in law school. Edgar and Judge Sam worked out at the same gym. And Edgar, as a bestacide prosecutor in Rufftown often tried cases in front of Judge Sam.

Edgar was a still relatively young beast. He was an American shorthaired with black fur except for one white circle of hair over his

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heart. Growing up in the mean streets of Rufftown, he often found himself bullied by Pitt Bulls and other brute dogs. Edgar learned how to fight. And he was determined to do better for himself. He got an education and worked up the ranks becoming a top prosecutor in the Rufftown Courthouse.

Living alone in his quiet house on the outskirts of Rufftown, Edgar enjoying catnip dialing people, especially Judge Sam, when he wasn't out for a nighttime stroll around the small city.

Edgar listened to his Johnny Cash CD in the background. He turned the volume up after he heard his favorite song, "The Reverend Mr. Black," playing. He meowed along to the song as he thought about how he was alone in his life, but that everyone would be alone in dying. And thinking of this shared misery made his sad mental burden of loneliness feel somewhat lighter.

After finishing up his catnip cigar and his glass of brandy, Edgar left his house and went out to walk around the town for exercise. He was obese, but he was trying to take off some of the pounds with nightly exercise.

"Ruff! Ruff! Ruff!" a small Maltese barked and charged at him as he left his front door.

"Mopsey, I'm not up for this tonight," Edgar mumbled.

The dog didn't care. Taking a rabbit name because she liked the hop instead of run, this nasty bitch who was half the size of Edgar would not relent. It moved in for an attack as usual. And Edgar, not then in the mood for a confrontation, quickly ran away.

But his pride was hurt. "Bitch. I'll get back at her," Edgar thought as he outran her.

* * *

"I've never been so hung-over," Edgar said as he woke up the next morning in his bed. He had smoked and drunk a lot. He had called the judge and made a fool out of himself, almost got his ass kicked by a dog half his size, and then went on a long and rambling walk through Rufftown before returning home at some time that was unclear to him.

Turning on his T.V. he was shocked by the top story. The Easter Bunny had been killed. He was slaughtered in the early morning

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hours while traveling through Rufftown. The mayor of Rufftown, an Irish Wolfhound, was quoted as saying that while it was sad, the Easter Bunny should have known better than to come through the city.

“Why won’t the creatures here just leave the Easter Bunny alone?” Edgar said to himself. “Why must we chase and hurt it? It does so much good. It is a shame. The mayor might not care. Maybe no one cares. But we should. We can’t just allow the slaughter of the Easter Bunny to go unsolved and unpunished.”

Edgar jumped out of his bed and headed out the house to the crime scene. It was a short walk and the weather was nice that early spring morning.

“Here we are,” Edgar said to himself as he looked down on the path and found the body of the Easter Bunny which was being picked at by birds and other animals.

Getting out his cell phone, Edgar dialed up the best detective that he knew.

“Detective McDonald,” Edgar said to the Scottish Deerhound.

“Yes,” the dog replied with some resignation in his voice.

“This is Edgar. I need your help with a case,” Edgar excitedly replied.

“Do you need my help now? It is Easter Sunday,” McDonald tersely said.

“I’m afraid it can’t wait. The body is wasting away in the street.”

“What?” said the shocked detective. “Why are you calling me then? Call the police and they will send someone out. If I am assigned to the case by the department then I will help. But there are plenty of other able detectives working.”

“I wish it were that simple, detective,” replied Edgar. “But no one else cares about the Easter Bunny. The mayor made that quite clear this morning.”

“The Easter Bunny? You want me to investigate the killing of a rabbit? Edgar this is insane. You woke me up for this?” McDonald angrily replied.

“McDonald, it was a brutal killing of a poor creature who was simply trying to spread joy. Whoever attacked this bunny is a possible threat to every single cat and dog out there in this town. We need

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to figure this out and hold the guilty creature responsible!” declared Edgar.

The two argued for several minutes about the value of the Easter Bunny and the necessity of solving his killing. Eventually, Detective McDonald just gave in and stated “Fine, I’ll come over and play your game. I could use the overtime anyway.”

* * *

Edgar guarded the body from birds and other scavengers as he waited for the arrival of the detective. It was an unusual circumstance. Usually the police would respond first to a bestacide scene and would secure it. Then he might be called to it to follow the investigation, which would typically be led by the police detective. But the police department of Rufftown did not view solving rabbit murders as important.

Still, he knew that he could get Detective McDonald to care, and that McDonald might be able to get others to care as well. It troubled Edgar to know that this poor creature could be slaughtered. He had read what it was like for cats in Rufftown when they first came to the city a few decades before. Dogs would chase and often kill felines, and no dog would do anything to stop it. They had no protection in the law. Eventually things changed, but it took a long time.

Until a few years prior, the mere possession of catnip was a crime because the dogs wrongly believed that it made cats both violent and even lazier. The Rufftown jail was filled with cats who had possessed catnip. Eventually the dog leaders of the city realized that stupidity of their war against catnip and ended the prohibition. Many dogs had considered cats to be untrustworthy and evil. Those beliefs were based in old world superstitions, and for the most part slowly died off by the time Edgar had grown up.

Regardless, the history of this discrimination still haunted him. And he had been reminded of it just the other night when Mopsey, his cat-hating neighbor, had attacked him for no reason, as was her custom. Although usually he would just swat her off and not worry about it. This discrimination suffered to some degree by him and to a much larger degree by his cat ancestors made him want to find out who murdered the Easter Bunny, and to hold that creature responsible.

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“Edgar, how are you?” Detective McDonald asked as he walked up with two police Pit Bulls.

Edgar was a bit startled as he had been looking off into the sky and thinking about his desire to see justice done. “Oh, detective. I didn’t expect you here so quickly. Thanks for coming,” Edgar replied.

“Okay, Che and Jackson, I need you dogs to comb the area looking for witnesses,” McDonald said to the other two officers.

They went off dutifully as McDonald and Edgar looked at the body.

“Brutal killing. The work of a cat. You see the claw marks there. Classic cat pattern. And right to the neck. This cat wanted this rabbit dead,” McDonald said as he looked at the corpse.

“Sickening that one of my fellow felines would do this. But we know there are plenty of violent cats in this town,” Edgar remarked.

“I agree. Well now that we know that it was a cat, there is not much else in terms of evidence we can get from this body. It is just going to rot. Want to eat it?” McDonald asked.

Edgar hesitated for a moment. He wondered whether or not that was right. But then he remembered that he was a cat. “Sure, I haven’t had breakfast yet,” he replied.

The two then sat down on opposite sides of the corpse and picked away at it.

As they finished up their meal, the two Pit Bulls returned and had two other dogs with them, a golden Labrador and a black Labrador.

“Boss, these Labradors here claim they saw something last night,” Jackson said.

“What did you see?” McDonald asked.

“Oh my God, it was like so horrible. I was with Jacob here and I saw this kitty cat was hiding in the bush and when he saw the rabbit, he just started chasing after it for no reason. It didn’t say anything. It was just so scary and then it jumped on the bunny and killed it,” the male golden Labrador said with a lisp.

“I didn’t get a great view of it because Tacker here was blocking my view somewhat. We were making love. He was looking outside the window while I was behind him so his head got in the way. But I heard the meowing and saw something run off into the distance,” Jacob, the male black Labrador stated.

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“Anything else? Could you tell what color the cat was?” Edgar asked.

The two Labradors just started laughing. “Oh my dear pussy cat,” Tacker said. “We’re dogs. We are colorblind!”

“Oh yes. I forgot. But could you tell if it had darker fur or lighter fur?” Edgar asked.

“It was hard to say because it was so dark. I just know it was a pussy. Seeing it startled me,” Tacker said as Jacob giggled a bit.

Tacker then commented, “I tried to warn the bunny when I saw he was near the cat. The bunny reacted to my barking. But the cat seemed completely unfazed, like he was deaf or something. I know I was barking very loudly and that cat didn’t react at all. They usually do.”

Edgar and McDonald just looked at each other and thought the same thing. They had a suspect.

* * *

It was a seedy place called The Pussy Bar a few hundred feet from the crime scene. Frequented only by cats, as the name would suggest, it was the favorite hangout for a neighborhood lowlife named Alabaster.

At one point Alabaster had it all. He ran a pimping operation all over the North Side. He could get any pussy all the pussy he wanted. And he could do it at a great rate because he sold in great volume. But then things turned bad suddenly for him one day. The white kitty woke up and just didn’t have his hearing any more. He got depressed and took to harder drugs than catnip. He lost his business sense. Rivals took over and before he knew it he had no whores or money left.

Spending his days just trying to steal enough to get drunk or high, Alabaster lived on the margins of society. On occasion he would get into trouble with the law, either for stealing or for the occasional unprovoked attack on another beast. Just the prior month he had been put on probation by Judge Sam for swatting at a puppy. Thankfully for the puppy it was a German Shepard named Seamus and he despite his youth was able to defend himself quite well. Alabaster was lucky to escape with all nine of his lives.

“Anyone in here see Alabaster last night or this morning?”

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McDonald asked as he entered the sparsely populated establishment with Edgar at his side. McDonald was surprised that it was open on Easter Sunday, but then he remembered that all animals, including himself, did not have a religion.

“Who wants to know?” one of the tougher looking cats at the bar replied.

“The police!” McDonald said as walked up and put his paw on the cat in a show of dominance.

“Hey dog, I just don’t know,” the clearly intoxicated cat said as he tried to sound less aggressive.

Edgar then spotted Alabaster hiding in a corner under a table.

“Don’t waste your time with this idiot,” Edgar said to McDonald as he directed his attention to Alabaster.

The detective and the prosecutor left the cat at the bar and then proceeded to Alabaster. Alabaster tried to run away, but Edgar and McDonald managed to block him in.

There was no ability to question Alabaster as neither one knew cat sign language. But then again there was no need either. Alabaster had dark spots, which could have been red, all over his white coat. And he was drinking and smoking catnip, which was in direct violation of his probation. McDonald had more than enough to take the pussy in.

* * *

On the way into work Monday morning, Edgar saw Zoey, a three-legged female dog, begging in the streets as usual. And as usual, Edgar tossed Zoey a Rufftown quarter and Zoey barked in appreciation.

Getting into his office in the courthouse, Edgar sat down at his desk. He did not discuss his involvement in the Easter Bunny case with his supervisor. He couldn’t have even discussed it with his supervisor if he wanted to because his supervisor had called out sick. Everyone suspected the top dog was hung over in a gutter as usual.

Edgar had exchanged pleasantries with his officemate Lily, a small Pekinese. With white fur and pretty big bugged out eyes, Lily was the cutest dog in the office. New in town, she had started her career in Sheepville, which was several miles away, as an advocate for dogs who herded sheep on farms. She came to Rufftown because she wanted the excitement of being a city lawyer.

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“So how was your weekend?” asked the usually well-mannered bitch.

“Can’t complain. I solved the Easter Bunny killing with Detective McDonald. We are going to pick a jury today,” Edgar replied in an upbeat tone.

Most of the minor disputes between the beasts were resolved by Dogs or Cats of the Peace, who were lower-level trial judges. Respected for their calm demeanors and fairness, most cases were resolved by those judges and few beasts appealed those decisions to the upper level Rufftown courts where Sam was the only judge. The legalization of catnip also served to greatly lighten the load of the court system. As a result cases, even very serious ones, could proceed promptly to trial. Justice was never denied on the account of being delayed.

“Really? That’s great. I’m glad that you care about the Easter Bunny. It was just so sad what happened to him. Can I prosecute the case with you?” Lily asked.

“Sure. I can always use more help. We are going down to the courtroom in a few minutes,” Edgar replied.

Edgar picked up his notepad and pen and headed out of the office and down a few steps to the courtroom. Lily followed along. Edgar stopped just outside the courtroom to lick himself while Lily proceeded in first.

“Good morning, Lily,” said Donald the Great Dane.

Donald was an amazingly spry ten-year-old defense attorney. Quick on his paws and aggressive, the Great Dane hated to lose a case. He seldom pleaded his clients out. He tried many cases. Won many. Lost many. Many guilty and some innocent animals were free because of him. And many animals were doing hard time in the pen because he was their attorney and he had rejected decent plea offers and had lost at trial.

“Good morning, Donald,” Lily responded. Unlike other prosecutors she wasn’t concerned to see Donald. She had already defeated Donald twice in trial in the somewhat short period that she had been in Rufftown and was confident in Edgar’s ability to convict in the present case.

“I take it you have the Alabaster case? It is the only one on the docket,” Donald replied.

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“Of course. I have it with Edgar,” she replied.

“Edgar? Edgar!” Donald replied. “This is going to be a fun day. I can’t believe that you are even prosecuting Alabaster. He is innocent. And I am going to prove that at trial!”

“Whatever,” Lily replied. She was concerned because Edgar had not come into the courtroom yet and it was almost time for the judge to come out. And she didn’t really know anything about the case.

Going outside the courtroom she found Edgar asleep on the floor. She promptly barked at him and pushed him with her nose. Edgar woke up, apologized for falling asleep and then entered the courtroom.

Edgar looked around. He saw Tacker and Jacob there. Detective McDonald was also present. He felt good because all of his witnesses were there. He and Donald didn’t even have time to talk when the clerk, a cat, loudly meowed and then announced, “All sit for the honorable Judge Sam!”

Sam, the black-and-white mutt, walked up toward the judge’s bench. He stopped for a moment to bark and then to chase his tail for a few seconds. He eventually made his way to the bench. He looked at Lily and smiled at her because they used to date when they were both young pups living in Humanville, before Sam left for Rufftown and Lily went to Sheepville. She smiled back.

“Quite a case we got here today. The Easter Bunny killing,” Sam said as Pit Bulls brought Alabaster up from the lockup. They placed him next to Donald at the trial table and then sat behind him. A cat hired by the court did sign language so Alabaster could understand what was being said.

“Does anyone want to engage in plea discussions?” Sam asked.

“Absolutely not, your honor. My client is innocent and we are ready for trial!” Donald stated and then barked.

“Your honor, the State is ready as well for trial,” Edgar stated.

“Very well. Call for a jury!” Sam yelled.

* * *

Jury selection took most of the morning. A group of fifty dogs and cats (about eighty percent dogs and twenty percent cats) was called into the courtroom. They had all been selected that day for jury duty,

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but only twelve of them, plus an alternate, would be selected that day to sit on the jury.

Judge Sam read out a list of questions that tried to determine whether or not the beasts would be fair. He then invited all of the animals to come up to his bench with the lawyers to answer the questions. Some of the dogs stated that they could not give a cat a fair trial due to their dislike of felines. Many said that they did not believe that killing a rabbit, even the Easter Bunny, should be a crime. Those potential jurors were all excused by the judge. Eventually a jury of seven dogs and five cats, plus one alternate juror who was a dog, was seated.

The judge then invited the parties to give opening statements.

“Members of the jury, this case is about a brutal killing that was completely unjustified,” Edgar said as he rose to speak. He then took a moment to lick himself again before proceeding. “You will hear evidence that Alabaster was on the scene on Saturday night when the Easter Bunny was killed. Tacker, a dog who was being made love to by his homosexual lover Jacob, saw a cat attack the Easter Bunny as he was hopping along to Humanville. Tacker barked out at the bunny to warn him. The bunny noticed Tacker’s barking. The cat, however, did not respond in the slightest. Every cat reacts when barked at. It is just a natural reaction. You all know that. But why didn’t the killer of the Easter Bunny react? Because he is deaf! He couldn’t hear Tacker’s barking. Alabaster committed a heinous crime. He tore apart the Easter Bunny. You are going to hear from Detective McDonald, a good Scottish Dearhound with over twenty years of experience on the force. He is going to confirm that the Easter Bunny was killed by a cat. And he is going to tell you how he found Alabaster the next morning in a nearby bar, drunk, and with dark, I submit to you blood, stains on his white fur. When you put this all together you will have no doubt that Alabaster is guilty of murder. Thank you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Edgar,” Judge Sam stated. “Mr. Donald, if you like you may now address the jury.”

“Thank you, your honor,” said the Great Dane as he jumped up to speak. “My fellow hounds and felines. This is an injustice. The State drags my client in here to face false charges of killing a rabbit! A rabbit! Think about that for a moment. You can dress this rabbit

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up all you want and call him the Easter Bunny, but he is still a feces-eating rabbit!”

“Meow!” stated Edgar as he rose from his seat.

“Sustained!” Judge Sam replied. “Let’s try to keep on point, Mr. Donald,” instructed the judge. “Jurors please disregard those last remarks from defense counsel.”

The instruction was given, but the damage was already done. Many of the cats and dogs had motioned their heads in agreement with Donald.

“Anyway, this is about an innocent kitty who was wrongly arrested and charged by police and a prosecutor in a rush to judgment. Yes, a cat did kill this rabbit. But it wasn’t Alabaster. Alabaster was at the Pussy Bar all night. You will hear from a witness who will tell you that he saw the killing and that it was not Alabaster who was involved. In fact he recorded the incident on video and we will play that for you. You will be convinced of my client’s innocence by the end of this case. Thank you.” Donald sat back down.

Edgar was unfazed by Donald’s statements. He knew that Donald was often full of bluster.

First to testify was Detective McDonald. He testified about how in his expert opinion the Easter Bunny had been killed by a cat. He recounted his conversations with Tacker and Jacob. And he testified about what happened when he entered the Pussy Bar and found Alabaster. He testified to the fact that the cat reeked of catnip and alcohol and also had what might have been blood on him. Edgar finished his direct exam, and then Donald asked his questions. Donald got the detective to admit that there were plenty of other cats in the area that night, and that no one could say whether or not the dark stains on Alabaster were blood or wine or throw up or anything.

“The State calls Tacker,” Lily said and the golden Labrador got out of the audience and walked to the witness box. Edgar decided to allow Lily to do the direct exam of their second and final witness.

After being sworn in, Tacker started his testimony. He recounted about how he saw a cat and the Easter Bunny outside the window while Jacob was making love to him. He told about how he tried to warn the rabbit by barking. He remarked how the rabbit reacted to his barking, but the cat was completely unfazed. After slaughtering the rabbit, the cat ran off.

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As he testified, Tacker looked at Lily and began to question his own sexuality. He had been sure that he was gay. But he found himself very turned on by her. He decided to let himself follow his attractions.

“Ruff, ruff, ruff,” Tacker said to Lily as he gazed at her.

“Ruff, ruff,” she replied.

Then Tacker jumped out of the witness box and proceeded to mount Lily. The other animals looked unfazed. This was normal for them, even sometimes in court. In fact two cats in the jury were also making love as this was going on. But Jacob could not take it.

“Ruff! Ruff! Ruff! Ruff!” stated Jacob as he approached Tacker, who was in the middle of making love to Lily.

Tacker growled back at Jacob and then finished his act before retaking the witness box.

“How could you do this to me?!” Jacob demanded as he stood next to Lily and Edgar at the trial table.

“Please, sir, take your seat. We must get on with the trial,” Judge Sam said.

“Judge. Tacker just betrayed me. We can’t just ignore that. And he betrayed who he is. He betrayed his own nature!” Jacob pleaded as he held back tears.

“I didn’t betray myself,” Tacker said as he started to cry. “I was just being who I am. I have been thinking a lot recently about my desires. I’m tired of being your bitch, Jacob. I’m a dog. I’m a stud. And I think I want to mount a few bitches and then settle down and have puppies!”

“How can you say that, Tacker?!” Jacob screamed. “Has someone brainwashed you? What we had was special. It was love. And it was meant to last forever! Now you can pretend to change, but you know in your dog heart that you’re a bitch and you like it that way!”

“Jacob, I don’t know exactly what I am anymore. But I have found my desires changing. I’m not pretending to be something that I’m not. I’m just being what I am. I don’t know maybe I was just going through a phase the last couple of years. Maybe I’m just going through a phase now. Only time will tell. But I think I deserve the freedom to be the dog that I am meant to be. As for you, regardless of whether or not I continue to mount Lily or other bitches, you are now out of my future. And I wish I could write you out of my past. You

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are a selfish dog who didn't care about me. You only cared about the pleasure that mounting me brought you. Good bye forever!" Tacker yelled with tears running down his face.

Jacob turned around and ran out of the courtroom. Before he left, as he came to the door, Jacob turned and said "Yeah, well goodbye forever too. You'll find your belongings on the curb!"

"Okay, can we please get back to this trial?" an exhausted Judge Sam asked as he looked around his courtroom.

"Yes, of course, your honor," Lily responded.

Everyone quieted down and Lily asked Tacker a few final questions to wrap it up.

On cross-examination, Donald got Tacker to admit that he couldn't identify Alabaster as the cat who killed the rabbit. He couldn't give a good description of its size, except to say that it looked overweight (Alabaster, while not terribly fat had been told by his vet to drop a pound or so).

The State rested its case. Judge Sam then asked Donald how long he would be and whether or not he thought they should break to eat.

"Your honor, I plan to exonerate my client with only one witness and to show who the real killer is in a few short minutes!" Donald flamboyantly responded.

"Very well," Judge Sam replied. He didn't sound surprised or excited by Donald's response.

* * *

"Your honor, I call Zoey, the three-legged bitch," Donald announced. A hush came upon the courtroom as Zoey hobbled in with a videotape in her mouth. Edgar wondered just what exactly Donald had up his sleeve.

After barking under oath to tell the truth, Donald asked Zoey just what she had to tell the jurors.

"Well you see because I beg in front of the courthouse each day I am able to save up a lot of money. I don't have to pay rent or have any other bills. And dogs and cats, like Mr. Edgar here who is very generous, just toss me some money and you know I save it. But sometimes I like to spend it on myself. Well last week I thought it would be fun to buy a camcorder. Nothing fancy, just your basic

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cheap one. I had this crazy idea that I would make a documentary about my life and, you know, maybe people would want to watch it and then I could make some big money. Some of the other dogs at the shelter were going to help me to edit it," Zoey explained.

"And last Saturday night and early Sunday, what were you doing?" Donald asked.

"I was out on the north part of town filming. I saw the Easter Bunny making his way through town and I thought it would be fun to film him to lighten up my movie, which was for the most part kind of sad. While filming the Easter Bunny's activities, I saw a cat on the scene. And then I saw that cat chase the Easter Bunny and then kill it. I filmed it and some of the aftermath. But I fled soon after because I was too upset. I just went home and cried about it. Poor bunny," Zoey said as she started to tear up a little. "You know he had a family and all."

"And that video that you are holding now. Is that the video that you took the other night?" Donald asked.

"Yes, it is," Zoey replied.

"And is that a fair and accurate depiction of what you saw?"

"Yes, of course it is."

"Your honor, I would ask that this be entered into evidence as Defense exhibit one and be played for the jury," Donald stated.

"Any objection?" Sam asked Edgar.

"No, not at all," Edgar replied. He was curious as to what was on it.

Donald then took the video and placed it in a VCR, which was connected to a T.V. Donald then moved the T.V. so the jurors could clearly see it. Judge Sam and the two prosecutors rearranged themselves so that they could see it as well.

Donald hit play. The video was dark, but not completely dark. The Easter Bunny was hopping along on a somewhat lighted path. Then, out of the darkness a cat charged toward the bunny. It wasn't terribly clear, but the cat had dark fur and one light spot around his heart. Zoey followed the attack the best that she could considering that she was with a camcorder and without one leg. Much of the footage was of the ground. But the attack on the rabbit, including his pleas for mercy, could be heard. Then Zoey got a clear shot of the cat after he finished his work. "I hate rabbits," a clearly intoxicated Edgar said as he stumbled away from the scene.

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“Your honor, we rest our case,” Donald said as he sat back down.

Lily was stunned. “Edgar! How could you?” she said as she stood up and barked.

“I don’t know. I don’t remember any of that. Maybe I was thinking that the bunny was my neighbor, who is a dog who chases me. She resembles a rabbit somewhat. She certainly hops like one. I just don’t know. I’m sorry.” Edgar pleaded as he looked at the judge.

But there was not much commotion in the courtroom. And only a few looked surprised.

“Well, Edgar, you really out did yourself this year,” Judge Sam said as he started to laugh.

“What are you talking about?” Lily asked Sam.

“Edgar tries to kill the Easter Bunny almost every year. It is sort of like a tradition for him. He gets drunk and-or stoned and just goes out and tries to slaughter the thing. Usually he can’t find it and sometimes it gets away, but he always tries. And then he has some poor beast charged with it and the following Monday we exonerate him or her. Then he forgets or pretends to forget that he was involved in this and acts like it is serious when he is caught,” Sam explained.

“What? I don’t understand. Why would you do those things, Edgar? Why would he do that, judge?” a confused Lily asked.

“Because he’s crazy. Or at least that is what we say. No one really knows. I don’t think he even knows. Isn’t that right, Mr. Edgar?” Sam asked.

“I just can’t believe that I killed him. I’m so sorry, judge,” Edgar said.

“As usual, I feel the need to remind you that killing the Easter Bunny is only a five-Rufftown-dollar fine. And it is a civil offense, no criminality involved. And as usual, I will impose that fine and suspend it in lieu of one day of unsupervised probation. And at the successful conclusion of that probation I will strike this civil violation from your record. Thank you for providing us with this entertainment,” Sam said.

“And that’s just it. That is all that happens here?” a flabbergasted Lily asked.

“No, don’t be daft, Lily. More happens. I need to thank everyone. Zoey, thank you for your excellent video footage. Detective

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McDonald thanks for indulging Edgar and all of us again this year. Tacker, thanks for the drama. And Mr. Donald, thank you once again for putting on a wonderful show.”

“No problem, your honor. I enjoy taking part in this,” Donald proudly stated.

“Unhappily for your client, the detective did testify that Alabaster had been drinking at the bar. And that is a violation of my probation. He is backing up thirty days. The sentence here is three days incarceration. And I know to any human readers of this transcript that may not seem like a lot, but when your lifespan is short like ours it is actually a somewhat tough sentence,” Sam stated.

“Of course we understand. Thank you for not imposing the maximum,” Donald stated.

And with that the all-sit command was given as Judge Sam exited the courtroom. As was typical, the beast stopped briefly to chase his tail before arriving at his chambers. Alabaster was led off by the Pit Bulls to serve his sentence, while the attorneys walked out of the courtroom.

Once outside, Edgar remembered that he did do this every year. “I completely forgot, as usual, but I do try to kill the Easter Bunny every year. I guess that is the problem with being a non-rational beast. You do things that you don’t understand and then sometimes you forget about them,” Edgar stated to Donald.

“Yes, well that is just life. Have a good day,” Donald said as he meandered off.

Lily was still a bit upset by this incident and wanted to talk with Edgar about it. She couldn’t understand why he would kill the Easter Bunny and try to blame it on another cat and then spend time prosecuting that cat when the punishment was only a civil fine.

“Like I said, Lily, we sometimes do things that don’t make any sense. You’re a dog. I’m a cat. We like chasing bunnies. We like killing animals. It is just part of our nature. But we also feel some sympathy for other beasts too. Those two parts of my nature are both very active. I want to spill blood and yet I am horrified and want to stop the spilling of blood. I have both a desire to cuddle and a desire to kill. I can’t explain the contradiction. It exists in me. It exists in all irrational beasts. I wonder some days if we will always have this conflict within ourselves or if one day one side

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will win out. Such internal contradictions between good and evil exist even in semi-rational man," Edgar replied.

Lily wanted to discuss this further with Edgar. But he ignored her and walked to a corner in the courthouse and fell asleep.

Independence Day on the Chesapeake Bay

Chapter 1

It was a dark night in July 2006. Well I guess all nights are dark, aren't they? Sort of a silly way to begin this story. Sorry. Anyway, it was a night in July. It was darker than usual because clouds covered the moon. Does that make more sense?

A sailboat drifted across the northern Chesapeake Bay. That in and of itself certainly would not be unusual. Except that this sailboat lacked a captain, or a pilot, or even a skipper. And it didn't have a crew either. Sails fully up it drifted aimlessly. Three sheets to the wind you might say.

Though the boat drifted, it was not sailing. It was facing directly into the wind. It was in irons. A thirty-five-foot fiberglass boat with a full keel just drifting with a new coat of blue paint and recently installed navigational lights. Hours later, in the morning right after the sunrise, the boat was spotted by local boaters as being without crew. Soon emergency responders boarded the boat and searched for signs of life. Other than the lonely spider crawling around its web off the stern, nothing could be found.

The government officials got on their computers to confirm what a local boater had already told them. The boat belonged to a Lenny Phillips of Baltimore County, Maryland.

The officials went to the house of Mrs. Phillips who resided in Towson, a nice suburb of Baltimore County, and asked her if they could speak to her. Not knowing what it was all about she gave a hesitant response in the affirmative. Standing in the doorway blocking sight of the rest of the house, which was a mess, with her two hundred twenty-pound body, she wondered just what was going on.

"Ma'am, did your husband go out sailing last night?" the one official asked.

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“Yes, he said he wanted to see the fireworks from his boat,” she replied still not knowing what these men wanted.

“Did you go with him?” the other official asked.

“No. I hate that damn boat. He spends all of his money and time on it and doesn’t have any time for me or the kids. You know I wanted to get a new diamond necklace last month. And he said he didn’t have any money for that because he needed a new outboard. He just got an outboard a year ago. It’s like he doesn’t just have one boat but is operating a fleet. It drives me crazy. And he always asks if I want to go out sailing with him, but he knows that I get seasick. So he just goes off without me and leaves me with three screaming kids. I’m sick of it. What is this all about by the way?” she eventually asked.

“Ma’am, did your husband come home last night?” one of the officials asked.

“No. He probably just got drunk and fell asleep on the boat. He does that a lot. He acts sometimes like he is a bachelor without any responsibilities. He needs to grow up!”

“Ma’am, we found your husband’s boat this morning. He was not on it. There is a search and rescue operation going on right now,” one of the officials stated.

Pam fell silent. She pondered the reality of the situation. Lenny had probably gotten drunk and fallen overboard. And now he was leaving her alone to raise his kids. After ending the conversation with the officials she closed the door and wept for her situation and also a bit for Lenny. At least she would have the insurance money she thought, that is if Lenny had kept up with the payments. Her concerns in this regard were relieved several days later when she confirmed the policy was still in force. The bigger problem was getting them to pay without the production of a body.

Time passed, as it tends to do, and no body was found. Nothing except some of his clothing, stained with blood, was recovered. The search was called off. Memorial services were called for. Pam and her three daughters attended them. Lenny’s employer, a big national bank where he had worked in IT, held a fundraiser for the kids’ education. All three daughters would have help attending college. And eventually the insurance kicked in. Pam and the kids were on Easy Street. The daughters were upset believing that their father was

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dead, but they at least knew that he died doing something that he loved, and that his friends and co-workers deeply respected him as a person and what he had done with his life. Yet forty-three seemed too young an age to die.

Chapter 2

A good night for a sail,” Lenny Phillips said to himself as he moved the tiller on his little sailboat. It wasn’t much, just an old twenty-five-foot fiberglass boat with a full keel and new four-stroke engine. Lenny had left it all behind. He had finally done what he had dreamt about for years. Left the hysterical bitch and the screaming kids. And now he was off in search of adventure.

“Why did I ever get married?” he asked himself as he sailed his little boat into the Chesapeake Bay with the intention of heading south.

It was a good question. And he had a good answer. He got married because he thought it would make him happy. He had been thirty-five and lonely. He was sick of the bar scene. Sick of trying to meet girls over the Internet. Tired of only getting the occasional fuck and that only with girls who really weren’t that hot. And he was tired of people thinking that there was something wrong with him because he wasn’t married. So he gave up his good sense. He gave up his independence and conformed his will to popular prejudices and got married. And he found that he was only more miserable.

The wife was a few years younger than he and reasonably hot, but she had weight control issues. And once they tied the knot those issues became bigger, and *she* became bigger. She was fat. She had gastrointestinal problems (she farted much, something that she had hidden before they married), and she loved to scream and bitch and whine about every little thing. God knows that Lenny thought about strangling her many nights, but restrained himself.

Kids! That will solve the problem! If we have kids it will be better! Lenny thought during a moment of his prolonged insanity. So he fucked her many more times than he wanted to and produced three girls over the course of five years.

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By the time he turned forty he realized that the screaming and annoying kids were not the answer. He was not good with kids. He couldn't put up with their crying and screaming much better than he could put up with his wife's screaming and crying. The evolutionary urge in him was strong enough to prevent him from entertaining any thoughts of killing his spawn, but not strong enough to keep him from looking to alternatives to a hellish life of commitment to his family.

So he thought up a plan. He would fake his own death and sail away into the night to something better. He set up a foreign secret bank account and mailed cash to it monthly. He never reported on the interest to the IRS, but thought it would be so small that they wouldn't notice. He couldn't send off much money each month, or else the wife *would* notice. It was just a small fund to get him started.

He had been a sailor since his youth and already owned a boat. But he bought a second one, not as nice or as big, and paid for it with cash. He kept it behind a man's house in the water in Sparrow's Point, a working-class community in Baltimore County near the water. Each month he mailed the man cash for the slip fee. He registered the boat under a fake name and used that man's address. The man didn't mind. Lenny just told the man that he was in the middle of moving and didn't have a permanent address when he registered it. Lenny told the man that his name was Bob Smith and wore glasses and combed his hair differently whenever he showed up to work on that boat, which no one else knew anything about.

Lenny also obtained false documents, a passport and ID under a fake name. There was a guy who worked in the Motor Vehicles Administration branch office in a mall in Towson, on Kenilworth Avenue. Lenny was referred to the gentleman from the janitor in his building in downtown Baltimore. For \$700 the gentlemen provided Lenny with a very real and yet very fake Maryland identification card.

Lenny planned to go to Mexico or somewhere else south of the border. He knew some Spanish, enough to get by at least. And he tanned easily. Lenny got a fake Mexican identification card and passport. A member of the office cleaning staff who he had befriended helped him with this. Lenny was good with befriending strangers because, despite his many flaws, he could care deeply about others, and when he did others saw that, responded well to that, and wanted to help him out, even if his requests seemed strange.

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Over the course of three years, Lenny saved every penny that he didn't have to spend. He got his new boat up to speed and stocked it with non-perishable foods, and with silver bullion and bars, most of which were purchased off ebay under his fake name. He paid with cash or money orders and cleaned the tracks of these transactions from his hard drive. By the time he turned forty-three in January, he was ready to go. He just wanted to wait until the summer to put his plan into action.

He often thought about the morality of what he was going to do. He knew that he would either end up killing himself or his wife if he continued how he was going. And he rationalized that this was better for his kids and even for his wife than divorce in that they would get all of his things plus the insurance money. He realized that he was not just leaving his family, but also giving up everything that he had worked for. But he also understood through much meditation that his inordinate attachment to things was not bringing him happiness. Like the rich young lawyer from the Bible, Lenny believed that he had to give up his property to be happy. He had to give up almost everything that he had. He was following his own terms and setting his own rules.

Chapter 3

I love you,” he said as he kissed his eldest girl on the head before he left that evening. She was sitting down in the family room watching T.V. He said to his wife that he would see her later. He was holding back tears trying to make it seem like nothing was wrong. His wife showed him no affection. She was pissed that he was going out on the boat. Walking out of the house he saw his two other children playing in a neighbor’s lawn with glow sticks with the neighbor’s kids and the neighbor herself. He waved to all of them. Then he got into his car and drove to his known sailboat. This boat was located in Essex, Maryland, also behind another man’s house.

Turning the corner of his street he started to break down in tears knowing that he would never see any of them again. The pain set in. Now it was no longer just a fantasy. And he started to have second thoughts. All he could end up thinking about in the end was his wife and how much he hated her. And how much he hated his job and the expectations that everyone, his friends, co-workers, and family had set up for him. He could not remain there and be free. He was not allowed to be himself anymore. He had abandoned himself years before.

Pulling himself together he said inwardly that it would be better for his children to lose him now, to experience loss while they were still young, so that they would not develop inordinate attachments to other people. It was an odd justification of his actions. Lenny had odd ideas that he sincerely believed in.

Arriving at his boat he boarded the vessel. After getting his sails ready he started the engine to motor out of the inlet, which did not get much wind. Then once out into the bay he turned off the engine and hoisted his sails. After sailing for a bit he put his bow into the wind and stopped his boat. He took off his shirt and pants. He scratched

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his skin with a knife. It produced some blood. He tried to get all of that blood onto the clothing that he had removed.

As he did this he reflected on the fact that sharks sometimes did find their way into the Chesapeake, that they were nocturnal, and that even a bit of blood could attract them. A shark attack in the Chesapeake was still unheard of and pretty damn unlikely he assured himself.

Looking at his map one last time and then looking at the stars as if to ask for divine protection, Lenny jumped into the water. It was cold, and it took his body time to adjust. He was a good swimmer and confident in his abilities. After two hours had passed he was dead tired. But he was at his second sailboat.

Then he got aboard his ship, untied the lines, and started the engine as he began his new life. Once out of the river and into the bay, Lenny hoisted his sails on this boat and sailed under the moonlight. Fireworks were now going off over Baltimore's harbor. Lenny watched them, but was careful as there were other boaters out. The authorities were also out looking for drunk or otherwise unsafe boaters. But with his lights properly affixed and himself steady at the tiller, Lenny caused no concern for anyone as he silently sailed down the Chesapeake.

He had sailed over most of the bay. He had charts, knew how to read them, and was proceeding with caution. But outside of the bay was the challenge. As a boy he had done some ocean sailing with his father. He knew that there were serious dangers ahead. He decided to try to trust in fate. And he told himself that he had done it before years ago, had recently read a lot of books about ocean sailing, and that his ancient forefathers knew even less than he when they set out on ocean voyages.

Sailing through the night was tiring. Lenny wanted so badly to take a nap, but knew that he couldn't. He had to be out of the immediate area at least before daybreak lest he would be recognized as the missing sailor. He plowed on through the darkness.

He reasoned that once he made it to the southern part of the Chesapeake Bay, in Virginia, he could safely stop there. They were not part of the same media market and were therefore less likely to recognize him. Eating some of the food stuffs that he brought along and drinking some soda, Lenny reflected more on his actions. He did

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feel bad for his children. But he kept telling himself that this was best for all.

The night was dark and lonely. He was tired. And sick and worried. The boat rocked. His nerves were disturbed. It was not too late to turn back he thought many times during the night. He could be back by early morning, then mid-morning, then late morning, and so on. Yet he did not give into these temptations. He pushed on singing his favorite Jimmy Buffett and Jerry Jeff Walker songs to himself.

Chapter 4

Morning broke. He was very tired. He figured that he was about a few miles south of St. Mary's County, Maryland. He put the boat in irons and then took down his sails. He put down his anchor. He went into his tiny cabin and put his head down and rested.

After sleeping well for two and a half hours his dreams started to trouble him. In his dream he was on his boat. He walked inside the cabin, and the small space got smaller as the walls pushed in on him. He panicked. Yelling and screaming he moved his arms about and tried to get free. But it was to no avail. The walls were crushing him. He woke up in a panic. He jumped up and his head hit the cabin ceiling. Panicking he jumped out of the small cabin into the open air of the cockpit. There he breathed the fresh air and looked around. It was midday on the fifth.

"Christ, maybe I need a bigger boat," Lenny said as he reflected on his dream. He tried to analyze it. He saw the walls as his family and stressful job. And saw himself fighting to be free of these responsibilities which he was never made for. He thought that the farther he got away from his home the more these dreams would cease.

He put his sails back up and continued to travel as he ate an energy bar. The winds weren't that bad for him. Usually they were very light in the Chesapeake during July. Perhaps it was the Divine Wind helping him out he speculated.

"Tangier Island," Lenny said as he looked at his charts. "That looks like a quaint place to stop." He was tired of being on the water and wanted some hot food. He took a few minutes to calculate his position. And then he set a course for that island unsure of what he would find there.

The red and green markers helped to guide him into port that afternoon. To his great relief there were signs of civilization.

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Houses and a few other small buildings could be seen. And most importantly there was a marina. He made his way into the marina and prepared to use his fake name for the first time. William Garcia. He was supposed to be an American of partial Mexican heritage. His documents showed him to have American citizenship (he was born in Detroit) and Mexican citizenship (his father was from Mexico City). He mother was a pure Anglo. He took more after his mother in looks he planned to tell people if they looked puzzled.

He docked. The man at the marina asked him his name out of politeness. Lenny told the man "William" with a smile. The man thought nothing of it. Lenny paid in cash for the slip, and that was that. After some small talk he started to make his way around.

Wanting real food he found his way into the Channel Marker Restaurant. He enjoyed some crab cakes, and the owner and the owner's wife came over to chat with him. They were very pleasant. He ate a crab cake sandwich and some chips along with a pickle that came with it. He wasn't full so he ordered some steamed clams and onion rings. That filled him up. He paid and then left.

He walked around and saw no cars. He didn't see anyone rushing around or stressed. There were just people on bikes or in golf carts who seemed reasonably relaxed about things. He noticed the name Crockett on a lot of the businesses and rightly concluded that it was a very tight-knit community. He didn't much care for that. He would rather just be another person in the crowd. He knew that this place was not for him. It was too close anyway. They would find him out. He needed to go to Mexico. That was what he had planned for. So, just after it started to get dark, he headed back for his boat. But he was grateful that he got to see this little gem in the Chesapeake.

Although night was coming on he wasn't too tired because he had slept a little earlier in the day and his adrenaline was still kicking in him. He was prepared to sail some more. Motoring his boat out of the slip until he could get some wind for his sails, Lenny sat back at his tiller and again thought about his wife. He knew that she would know that something was wrong by now. He would not have showed up the next day at home. Perhaps his boat had been found and the logical conclusion had been drawn. He smiled sadistically as he thought about the trauma that she must be going through. "Serves her right," he thought.

Chapter 5

He sailed south for three hours but then he got tired. He realized that he had better get in some serious sleep before he headed out into the ocean. The bay was calm enough for him. So once he got some miles south of Tangier Island he lowered his sails and threw out his anchor. He then went back to his cabin.

Once there he opened up one of the many bottles of French wine that he had brought with him for the journey. He drank a few glasses to calm his nerves. He then lay back down in his small bunk and prayed that he wouldn't have another nightmare. He had no dreams and five hours later he awoke somewhat refreshed. Getting back into the cockpit he hoisted his sails and caught some wind.

His boat moved slowly then, but it was still moving. It was hard work. Lenny felt that he was constantly tacking just to make any distance. He thought about turning on his outboard, but resisted the urge. That was only to be used for getting in and out of ports and for emergencies.

Fears and worries were not far from his mind. "What if they track me down? What if this really fucks up my daughters' lives and they become sluts with psychological problems fucking complete losers in order to satisfy an unconscious urge to get back at me or to fill the void my leaving caused?" He kept trying to tell himself that he could turn back. But he also kept telling himself as well that it was too late. "How will I explain it to the wife if I turn back now? I would never be able to escape again. And I can't stand her screaming."

He debated with himself for hours as he slowly headed south on his tacks. And he once again concluded that leaving was the best for all. He kept reassuring himself that he would probably have to kill his wife or himself if he went back and that was the worst for all. This was the best of the bad solutions to his life crisis he reasoned.

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The waves picked up. He was heading toward Hampton in the southern Chesapeake. It was evening again. He had already lost track of what day it was. And he didn't care. For now on for the rest of his life he was determined not to worry about time. The day of the week didn't matter. Years were meaningless. His age was to be non-existent.

Worried though about his stamina, he decided to again put his boat into irons, pull his sails down, and to put his anchor out. He knew the ocean was right in front of him. But until then he was still in the relative safety of the bay. So he once again retired to his cabin, drank some wine, and caught some sleep. He wasn't too tired to start with, but the wine helped him to slow down. Releasing his mind from all of his worries he entered into a semi-hypnotic trance as the waves moved his boat up and down. And in his mind he kept repeating a mantra that everything would be okay and that this was for the best.

Morning came and found Lenny at his tiller, guiding his boat under the Chesapeake Bay Bridge and over the tunnel. The adrenaline was really pumping for him now. This was as far south as he had ever been in the bay. He had sailed the ocean off Connecticut years before, and with his father had known Long Island Sound and the waters just beyond like the back of his hand. But this was new territory. The waves picked up even more once he passed the bridge. Swells picked him up and tossed him down. He felt like a cork being tossed about. He was a bit afraid.

The fears gave way to calm as he bounced about the ocean. He kept telling himself about the men before who had sailed the sea on boats about this size. He kept thinking about Joshua Slocum who had sailed alone around the world over a hundred years before in a wooden boat that was only about ten feet longer than his. Sure he didn't have Slocum's experience, but he was no novice either.

He found pissing and shitting while on the ocean to be difficult. He had a bucket with a toilet seat attached that he used. While in the bay it was not terribly difficult. But on the ocean swells it was a challenge. Still he managed to expel waste when he felt a great need to do so.

After many hours of sailing along the eastern seaboard, Lenny knew that he had to sleep. He had no desire to go inland and pay

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for a slip. Instead he secured his tiller with an autopilot. He got the idea from Captain Slocum, who rigged up his own wheel with ropes that somehow managed to keep him safe and on course (until at least Slocum died at sea years after completing his legendary journey). Lenny then turned on his navigational lights even though it wasn't terribly dark, and went beneath to sleep.

He found it hard to sleep at first. He knew he was being somewhat reckless leaving his boat to sail alone without anyone at the helm. Still he did it. And eventually after telling himself enough times that with less technology it had worked for Captain Slocum he was able to get to sleep.

A few hours later he awoke and everything was fine. He got back to his tiller. He and the cockpit were hot with the sun beating down on them. He was hungry. Using a can opener he opened a can of ravioli and ate that with a plastic spoon. It wasn't good but it gave him energy. He ate some cookies that he also brought along for more energy. He thought about his wife's cooking. "She may be a fat pig, but she knows how to cook," he said to himself. That was part of the problem though. She always cooked good food and then ate plenty of it. And she just became fatter and fatter. To her food was a friend, something to comfort her when she was feeling down. And he knew that wasn't healthy, mentally or physically. He had to get away from that. Food to him was energy and nutrition and nothing more.

Lenny stopped worrying about his wife and instead focused on where he was. As far as he could determine he had made it as far as South Carolina. He knew he had many more miles to go. He was tired, hungry, irritable. He had not gotten a proper night's sleep or gotten a proper meal. But he was free. And he was happier than he had been in a while. He knew that he had left plenty behind for his kids to be comfortable for a while. And he knew that he had left that screaming fat bitch behind. Never again would he have a wife or kids. He was starting anew and there was nothing that anyone could do about it.

Chapter 6

The days and nights drifted by as Lenny sailed farther south. He saw gigantic ships, sharks, all manner of jellyfish, dolphins, and plenty of birds. He wished that he had brought along a camera to document his trip. Sometimes, sitting at his tiller, he attempted to draw some of the things that he saw. But he was not a natural artist.

Often the sea was rough. There was one thunderstorm. He knew that it was hurricane season, but did not know if any were coming. While he was concerned with his self-preservation, he was not overly obsessed with it. In theory he had always believed that dying at sea would be just fine. But in those moments when that possibility felt like a potential reality, he was not so keen on it.

Sometimes he prayed. He did not particularly believe in anything. A confirmed Evangelical Lutheran, he never took that too seriously and considered his church to be rather uninspiring. His children were baptized. His wife was a non-practicing Catholic. Despite this lack of firm theological grounding, Lenny could reflect on his life and see where he had done wrong. And although he kept telling himself that what he was doing was the lesser of evils, he still knew it was evil. In his mind he was willing to ask God to forgive him, but not willing to turn back. He asked for help on the journey ahead and prayed for his children at home.

He found that the farther south he got, the more affection he felt for his children and even, on occasion, for his wife. He was smart enough to know that if he were to turn around, the farther north he would go the more those feelings would dissipate. He continued south.

It was not an exercise in cruelty towards himself or others. This was what he felt he had to do. It didn't matter how illogical, stupid, pointless, or sinful it appeared to others or even to himself at times. He knew he had to do this. He felt it in the innermost part of himself.

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Several nights had passed. He looked at his charts and determined that he was not far from Key West, Florida. He was proud and amazed that he had made it so far south. Sailing the ocean down the eastern seaboard was something that he had always dreamt of doing. But responsibilities at home had kept him from doing this. And before he was married he never got around to doing it. He had too many responsibilities even then with his job. Along with time, money was often tight as well.

He decided to stop in Key West. He had never been to the place, but had heard much about it from friends who had been there.

Chapter 7

“What the hell are so many chickens doing around here?” he asked himself after he docked his boat at a marina and started to walk around.

It was a strange place. Overrun with tourists, birds, and eccentric locals. Still it looked enjoyable.

Walking around he wore a pair of sunglasses and a hat, just in case he was noticed. He stopped in on a local bar. The bartender had the nerve to “card” him to see if he was over twenty-one, which was obvious. William Garcia placated the middle aged bearded man with his Mexican passport. It got a strange look. But it also got him a beer.

Sitting around the bar, which appeared to be popular with locals, William looked across the street and saw an Internet café. After he finished his drink he went there and pulled up a website for a local Baltimore paper. There he read about his disappearance in the newspaper. His wife was quoted saying something hysterical about how dangerous sailing can be. He just laughed.

He didn’t stick around too long. He bought a taco from a street vendor and then stopped in another bar for another drink. This time the bartender had the good sense not to “card” him.

Walking around the area he took in the beauty. He walked past Margeritaville, Jimmy Buffett’s establishment, but did not go inside.

Evening came and he was getting tired. He didn’t want to spend his money to stay at a hotel. So he went back to the marina and went to his boat to get some sleep.

The claustrophobic dream came again. He was again trapped in his boat. This caused him to wake in the middle of the night in a panic. He got off of his boat and went to walk around Key West in the night. Seeing all of the chickens he got an idea. He picked up two of

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them and carried them back to his boat. No one appeared to see him. No one stopped him. He put the chickens in his cabin. He tried to get back to sleep, but couldn't. So he just sailed away.

As the ocean bumped his boat up and down, he was thankful that he was almost to Mexico and that his next two meals would be good.

Chapter 8

He slaughtered a chicken using his Swiss Army knife. It wasn't pretty. Then he gutted it like he once saw on T.V. He kept a small gas powered grill on his boat. He lit it up and put the chicken parts on it. The whole process was really disgusting. And the chicken didn't taste terribly good either. He wondered why he didn't just buy some pre-slaughtered, processed chicken from a grocery store in Key West.

He couldn't eat half of it because it tasted so badly. He wondered what he would do with the other bird. He didn't want to slaughter a second one with his knife. He didn't want to eat it. But he didn't want it on board for the next week or so either. So feeling badly about what he had done and about what he was about to do, he picked up the bird and tossed it overboard. As the bird made desperate clucks for help and sank, he comforted himself by thinking of the sea creatures that would benefit from his cruelty.

Using his navigational tools, he aimed himself toward the southern part of Mexico. He figured that once he arrived in the area he would stay in the first reasonably decent town or city that he could find. He hoped that his American money and silver coins would be enough to feed and house him for at least a few weeks. Then he would try to find a job. He thought maybe he could work at a bar.

He also had another plan. In his previous life when he worked for the big bank he was in charge of their computer systems and website. He was a programmer and reasonably good at it. One night several years before while in his basement he wrote several applications that could be used for Internet gambling. He was going to set up a site until he read that it was illegal to run a gambling site in the United States. But he figured it would not be a problem for him to run a gambling site out of Mexico. Everything is legal in Mexico, he joked to himself.

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He didn't have the codes on him. They had long since been lost somewhere in his basement. But he figured that he could easily recreate them. In his head he planned out what his website would look like and how it would operate. He just had to get a computer with access to the Internet and a credit card in his new name to get going on his plan.

If it didn't work out, that was fine with him too. He was going away for peace and quiet, not to make tons of money. He had money back home that he was leaving behind. Still it would be nice he kept thinking.

Sailing through the day he got tired and thirsty. Thankfully he had brought along plenty to drink and had even purchased more bottled water while in the Keys, in addition to another bottle of wine. He drank some water. Then he drank the bottle of wine as he stood at the tiller. This along with the waves, the after effects of the chicken, and the exhaustion from the trip caused him to feel sick. He threw up over the side.

He saw a bright light in the sky and looked up and saw what appeared to be a flying saucer. It appeared to be only about thirty feet above him and a few feet ahead of him. As Lenny looked at the UFO he thought he could see two creatures standing in a window. They both appeared to have snorkels on top of their heads. Lenny waved at them and both creatures waved back. Then the craft flew off into the distance. He knew he was in trouble if he was seeing things like this.

He slowly made his way back into the cabin. He got on the little bed and closed his eyes. He thought he was going to die.

He started to regret some of his recent decisions as he lay there. He thought about his children. He prayed and asked for forgiveness. A few hours passed. He started to feel better. And then he went to sleep and awoke several hours later in the middle of the night.

Making his way back to the cockpit he again affirmed to himself that he would continue his journey.

A few days passed by and he felt better. Traffic on the sea was picking up. He saw Mexican flags on many of those ships. Some on smaller boats waved at him and he waved back. Then a few hours later he saw land. He steered his ship toward it.

Chapter 9

It was a small marina that he spotted first. A local on the dock greeted him with a smile and a wave. They exchanged greetings in Spanish. Lenny asked where he was. He was told that he was on Isla Mujeres, which was off the coast of southern Mexico.

He motored around until he found the harbor master. The harbor master requested to see his papers. He gave the man his Mexican ID and passport. The man smiled and then handed the documents back to William without giving them a second glance. The Mexicans were not overly concerned about white Americans invading their country and didn't really care if the documents were valid or not. William was then led to a slip which he paid for. It was not a large fee, so he paid up for the month.

After he got off his boat, William Garcia walked out of the marina and took a first look at his homeland. It seemed like a reasonable enough place. Sure there were tourists all around. It wasn't too far off the coast of Cancun. But there were also plenty of locals. And plenty of undisturbed little corners.

He stopped in to a restaurant called Los Portales, where he enjoyed some lobster and grilled steak. The bill was higher than he expected. He inquired about employment. After speaking to the boss he was offered a bus boy position. "Still better than fucking my wife," he thought as he begrudgingly accepted. It was not to be permanent, just temporary until he got his business established.

That night he stayed at a nice hotel, but realized that his finances would not permit him to continue with this. So he found a local apartment complex where many of the locals lived. It wasn't nice. But it was good enough. Over the next couple days when he wasn't working as a bus boy he went to a local bank where he was able to transfer the money in his foreign bank account to a new account in

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his fake name. The \$6000 dollars transferred to Mexican currency he had in his new account would be good enough to get started. He found a money trader who bought a few of the coins and bars of precious metals he brought with him at a fair price. That brought in a few more thousand dollars.

With part of this money, William bought a laptop from a store. One night during his first week there he plugged it in and began writing codes for the online casino he had planned to set up.

Drinking at local bars while not at work he talked with people about his dreams. On one of those nights he ran into a European businessman named Christian. Christian was from Germany and had recently set up his own online casino company. He had the finances but wanted more games and a better website. After several shots of tequila they agreed in principle to work together. Christian would pay William for each program that he wrote. They talked about money to some degree, and William was very happy and surprised by the money being offered.

The next day William called Christian. They agreed to meet up later that day on one of the beaches. William didn't show up for work. He would have called in sick had he known the number for the restaurant.

"You know the history of this place?" Christian asked William.

"Not a clue," William responded. Both were speaking in English.

"Aren't you Mexican?" Christian asked.

"Born in America. Got citizenship through my father who was Mexican. Lived most of my life in America. Want to retire down here," William responded.

"Any family?" Christian asked.

"No. Parents dead. No siblings. No wife. No kids," William lied.

"That's very sad," Christian commented. "I don't know where I would be without my wife. She is off shopping now. You will have to meet her."

"I'd love to. I suppose my situation is sad to a degree. But what does it matter? We all end up dead anyway. I'm happy I think. No one to worry about. No responsibilities. I can just get on my boat and go anywhere in the world. You can't do that," William remarked.

"I still find time to get away from work and from the family. At the end of the day my wife helps to sustain me. What gets you through the day?"

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“I think it’s sad, quite frankly, that you need other people to motivate you. If your wife died or other family members died you would be hopeless and lost in this world. What sustains me? My goals, dreams, and desires. Pleasure sustains me. A sandy beach, a warm breeze, a good drink, and the hope of more the next day. That keeps me going. Doesn’t the dreariness of every day life get you down? Don’t you get depressed about your situation?” William asked.

“Depressed? I think it would be abnormal if one didn’t get depressed. I think about my wife. God knows she is getting older. That doesn’t surprise me. I’m not allowed to have sex with anyone other than her. That would be depressing if I followed that commandment. But I have a mistress on the side. I think my wife suspects it. I suspect things about her. But at the end of the day we are with each other because we still love each other. And what is the alternative? Living alone? Dying alone? We enjoy each other’s company and forgive each other’s vices or flaws. We have a good relationship. My kids are special too. I would do anything for them,” Christian stated.

This caused William to reflect on his situation. He knew that he couldn’t stand his wife, and she would never tolerate him even looking at another woman. But his kids were special too. And he should not have left them. He started to well up a bit. Then as Christian put his arm around him, William broke down in tears.

Sobbing like a child, William eventually pulled himself together without revealing to Christian the true reason for his breakdown.

Trying to change the conversation because he was starting to feel uncomfortable, Christian started to again talk about the history of the island.

“From what I have read it was once sacred to the Mayan people and was dedicated to their moon goddess. When the Spanish came they saw all of the images of the goddess and called it the ‘island of the woman.’ Of course the old religion died out, but you can still find the remnants of the temple to the goddess. We walked around them when we were here last year. You know the people who live here were all very poor until tourism picked up in the 1970’s. Because it is so close to Cancun, tourism is the main business. People come out for day trips from Cancun. The wife and I fell in love with this place years ago and always spend several nights of our holiday here,” Christian said.

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They talked some more about the island and then while sitting on the beach worked out a business agreement. William would be an independent contractor. If Christian liked William's programs and used them, then he would be paid a commission and would receive royalties. The more people who played a game that William designed, the more William would make.

They signed the paperwork that Christian had prepared. William wasn't terribly sure if Christian could be trusted, but he seemed honest and William had no other means of making decent money. Christian didn't know if William would actually email him any programs. And whenever he signed up a new programmer he had the initial programs reviewed by other programmers and he had everything screened for viruses, Trojan horses, and the like.

Later that day William met Christian's wife. She seemed like a nice enough woman. They went out for dinner. Christian paid for everyone.

Chapter 10

The days drifted by. Months passed. Before long a whole year had gone by. More time then passed. William had ceased working as a bus boy after his first month on the island. He moved out of his efficiency apartment and into a modest house. The deposits from Christian came as promised. Four days a week William sat at his computer and wrote code for programs. First Christian was his only client. Christian referred other people in various Internet businesses to him. And William also had set up a website to sell some of the programs that he had developed.

Three days a week William spent the time however he wanted to. Usually he was on the beach or swimming in the ocean. He took up scuba diving. He sometimes took vacations and visited other parts of Mexico.

He picked up girls now and then but was still lonely. He was often sad. He thought more and more about his kids as the time passed by. The guilt bothered him. Every couple of weeks he would have a claustrophobic nightmare. One day in a book shop on the island he picked up a book about dreams. The author wrote that having a claustrophobic dream meant that one was burdened by guilt. He could not disagree.

Trying to find some relief he went one day and spoke to a priest on the island. After telling his story the priest told him he ought to return home and be with his wife and kids. William ignored this advice as best as he could.

“This ain’t so bad,” William said to himself one evening as he sat on a beach and watched the sun set. “I could live the rest of my life here alone.”

Walking back to his house he opened the door and then went to his bed to go to sleep.

Closing his eyes, he expected to enjoy another quiet night alone.

Chapter 11

FBI! FBI! FBI!” several men yelled as they ran into his house around three a.m.

Greatly disturbed, William Garcia opened his eyes and sat up in bed as several men dressed in all black and wearing ski masks entered. One of them with a New England accent barked “Put your hands where we can see them!”

“Okay, Okay. What is this about?” William pleaded.

“Lenny Phillips?” the man covered in black asked.

“What? What? Who? Who are you?” a disturbed William asked. He had heard them yell “FBI,” but from their dress and manner of entry he wasn’t sure if they were U.S. Government agents or terrorists, or perhaps both. And what business did they have in Mexico he wondered.

“FBI. Agent Rhodes,” the man with the New England accent said as he presented his credentials for William to expect.

“We have a warrant for your arrest, sir, for violation of the 2006 Internet Gambling law as well as for tax evasion and document and insurance fraud,” the main agent stated.

“What makes you think I am Lenny Phillips? My name is William Garcia,” William stated with as much sincerity as he could muster.

The agents did not take this lie lightly. William was pulled out of his bed and placed on the floor while agents took turns kicking him. After about five kicks the order was given to stop. Bloodied and bruised, Garcia was led off by the agents out of his house and into a black SUV.

“I have rights! You can’t do this! I want a lawyer!” William, now Lenny again, screamed.

One of the agents responded to this by pistol-whipping him and duct taping his mouth.

William H. Cooke

Several minutes later the agents arrived at the local marina. In the early morning darkness the agents walked him handcuffed to a waiting boat. Powering it up they fled with Lenny into the darkness.

He knew that something terrible had gone wrong. He wondered why he was being treated so poorly and what his fate would be. He was even more concerned when two hours later the boat came up to a U.S. Navy destroyer.

The boat pulled up next to the destroyer, and Lenny was instructed at gunpoint to climb a ladder that was put along the side of the ship. Agents were climbing up behind him. Once on board he was again cuffed and led to a brig. The charges were again explained to him by another FBI agent. He was advised of his rights. Despite the fact that he was severely bruised and bloody about his head, no offer of medical assistance was given. Lenny was too afraid to ask for any help. He didn't want to say anything again to the government.

He could hardly sleep or eat anything. He was more confused and frightened than he had ever been in his entire life. The events kept rolling through his head over and over. He could not understand the force, the anger, or even why the U.S. Government was even concerned with him. He wasn't a criminal. He wasn't a terrorist. "Why don't they go after Bin Laden like this?" he kept asking himself.

Three days later, after being kept in solitary in the brig, the agents came for him again. He was led to a chopper and shortly after landed at the Miami airport. From there he was placed on a private jet after he was re-secured with handcuffs, shackles, and a face mask--as if he were Hannibal Lechter. No one talked to him about where he was going and again he was too afraid to ask.

The plane soon landed at BWI, and he was placed in another big black SUV and rushed into downtown Baltimore.

He suspected that he was going to the Federal Courthouse and was not at all surprised when the SUV with him in it surrounded by FBI agents drove into its underground garage.

Tired, sick, bewildered and sad, Lenny was led to a small holding cell.

"A public defender will speak with you shortly!" a female government agent said as she looked on him with contempt.

Chapter 12

Seems you got yourself into a bit of trouble,” the middle aged and somewhat attractive red-haired female federal public defender said as she smiled and walked in about an hour after Lenny was put in the cell.

Lenny was not in the mood to look at smiles.

“The government has been looking for you for some time. About six months after your disappearance serious questions started to come to the attention of the authorities. They talked to cleaning staff at your building who helped you to get the forged documents and they traced all of your actions on your old computer. They quickly found your foreign accounts and traced your actions on your computer in Mexico. Sadly for you the Republican Congress in late 2006, in a desperate attempt to drum up support from their conservative base, passed the Internet Gambling Law which made it a felony for any person, even if not an American citizen, to operate or to provide any material support to online casinos, even if based outside the United States and not targeted toward American citizens. A bit of a controversial law. They didn’t think Mexico would extradite you on that charge, thus the illegal midnight raid. The Mexicans are very upset about the whole thing,” his lawyer informed him.

Lenny, still completely in shock, didn’t know how to react. He just sat there for a moment and then asked, “Why the fuck should anyone care if I write a few programs for a gambling site? Isn’t this all a bit extreme?”

His public defender explained to him that it was indeed extreme, but still very real. “Now brace yourself. I’ve got to tell you the worst part. A violation of the act carries a mandatory minimum of thirty years in prison,” she said in a serious tone.

“Thirty years? That’s fucking insane. I didn’t kill anyone!” Lenny protested.

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“Oh but to those Congressmen you aided in killing the dreams of kids who wanted to go to college but couldn’t because daddy lost all of the money online. You are the scum of the earth to them,” she informed him.

“This is completely unreal. I don’t know how this happened. What can you do for me?” Lenny said in desperation.

“I’ve reviewed the case. I don’t see the point in taking this to a jury. The jurors down here in the federal system are usually from the most conservative parts of the state. The conviction rate is absurdly high. They have you pretty dead up. You could get life alone on the gambling charge and in the federal system there is no parole. You could get decades on the insurance and document fraud added onto that as well along with a couple years for tax evasion. Let me try to work out a package deal, but understand that the minimum is thirty years. With good behavior you will only have to serve about eighty-five percent, so you could be out before you hit seventy and have some good years of freedom left in your life. Otherwise you are likely to die behind prison walls, and I want to do what I can to avoid that for you.”

Lenny and his public defender discussed the situation some more. Try as she might she could not convince him that this was not all a bad joke or a good nightmare. She left him. Lenny just sat in his holding cell with his head against the wall praying for God’s help.

The trial date was set for later that year, and Lenny would spend his time waiting in a small cell in Baltimore’s Supermax which was rented out to hold Federal prisoners. No one but his attorney came to visit him.

He suspected that his wife hated him. This was confirmed one day when his lawyer told him that the insurance company had demanded the return of the monies paid after it was determined that he was still alive. Pam had already spent the bulk of the money on food, cheap wine, fancy cars, and vacations. She had to sell her house, move into a low-budget apartment with the kids, and get a job. She was miserable. She had believed when she got married that she no longer would have any real world responsibility. She was sadly disabused of that notion. Although her return to squalor was inevitable given the amounts that she was spending.

Nearly two years after Lenny jumped off his boat, on July 2, 2008, Lenny entered a plea of guilty. The Government reluctantly agreed

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to the thirty-years sentence, but only after his public defender spent an hour yelling at the prosecutor in a conference. The prosecutor had initially wanted life *plus* twenty years.

At the sentencing hearing, Pam was present. Invited by the government to give a statement she stood up and approached the podium. She turned to Lenny and gave him a nasty glance before turning to the Judge, who was an elderly man.

“Judge, this man has destroyed my life. He has caused harm beyond repair to me. He is selfish and never once thought about what this would do to me. I am sickened that he is only getting thirty years! He deserves death! Or at least life in prison!” Pam started to scream as she began hysterical and started to cry.

“Okay, I’ve heard enough,” the judge said. He was clearly annoyed.

“No Judge! You haven’t heard enough! You’re just like all men! Scum! Now listen to me! You have no idea what this man has done to me! And you are just going to let him walk out of here with only thirty years when he has destroyed my life!” she screamed in her hysterical state.

The judge had her led from the courtroom in cuffs and later in the day would find her in contempt and sentence her to thirty days in jail.

To the defendant, the judge showed as much leniency as the law would allow.

“Sir,” he stated calmly, “I don’t like this gambling law. I think it is poorly thought out and the mandatory minimum is extreme. Thirty years for a non-violent offense ought to shock the conscience. These legislators who write these laws have no concept of how cruel a sentence this is. The longest day anyone will spend will be the day he does in prison. Prisons are harsh and brutal places which ought to be reserved for people who frighten us, not some poor miserable irresponsible bastard who angers us, but who otherwise does no great harm to the whole of society. Many of your personal decisions and actions were wrong. But the penalty is excessive. Still I am bound by it. I’m sorry for rambling on. The sentence of this court is 360 months. Have a nice Fourth of July.”

With that Lenny was led out of the courtroom. The prosecutor and the public defender agreed to go out for a drink.

Chapter 13

Big Sandy United States Penitentiary in eastern Kentucky was to be Lenny's new home. About a month after his sentencing he was secured and placed in a van. Nine hours later he arrived to this high security facility and was welcomed with a body cavity search.

Sitting in his cell he felt miserable and started to write about his life. At some point he started to write about his journey and attempted to rationalize his actions as best he could. At the start of these writings he wrote, "I suppose I should explain myself. God knows (if He exists) that if you hear everyone else's version of this story you aren't going to like me very much. But then if you hear my version you might not like me too much better. Hell you may even like me less. Try to keep an open mind though. We all live our lives with different 'hang ups' so to speak. Different mental problems which strive to keep us from being happy. I'm just like you. Trying to conquer my demons. Trying to find some peace before I have to die." These writings of his provided the background information for this short story.

Lenny hated the prison, which was to be expected, and he often wrote about his problems there. He noted that he did serve a useful service as a peacemaker among the various factions. Although getting up into his late forties, the other inmates still thought that he was cute and nicknamed him "Cupcake Phillips." The Aryan Brothers, the Black Muslims, and the prison guards could not agree on much. But they all did agree that this trim, sandy-blond prisoner was quite a looker. And although most were not predominantly homosexual in orientation before they entered the prison and most would tell you that they "hated fags," they still wanted to have their way with Lenny. So the three different groups conspired to share him among themselves. They also made a pact to see that he was protected.

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Sick of being treated as less than a slave, Lenny one night in late 2010 used his bed sheets and hanged himself from a rafter in his cell.

“I can’t take it anymore. What they do to men is inexcusable and insufferable. God have mercy on me,” were the last lines of his journal.

No one to claim his body, Lenny was buried on the prison grounds. The other prisoners were sad to see him go.

In 2013 a new president, Dr. Ron Paul, took office and pardoned everyone convicted under the 2006 Internet Gambling Act and also reduced the sentences of many people convicted of non-violent crimes. In releasing those charged with supporting Internet gambling, the new president paraphrased the great philosopher Herbert Spencer and said “the effect of protecting people from their folly is to fill the world with fools!”

