

# The Portal

A cool collection of short stories and poems



## Silent Night By Jamie White

“Shush! You’ll get us caught, stupid!” Brandon whispered.

“You shush,” Alicia argued quietly. “You were the one who stepped on the Casey’s squeaky toy.”

“Whatever,” Brandon said. “Come on.”

Brandon led his sister down the staircase, careful to glance back every so often to make sure that his younger sister was still behind him and their parents weren’t watching them with disapproving looks. He sure didn’t want to get sold out by the little brat again.

Why did parents have more than one kid anyway? He wondered. As far as he was concerned, things were much better

when he was an only child. For one, he never had to share presents at Christmas. Everything under the tree would be for him. Plus, he was never forced to watch some dumb girly cartoon with ponies that looked like mutants. He still couldn’t understand why she liked that show, but he couldn’t wait until she grew out of watching it.

They crept down the last few steps and glanced back upstairs, both breaking into wide grins as they realized their parents hadn’t heard a thing. They were still fast asleep in their room instead of getting ready to scold them for not being in bed.

“If Santa gets here before you’re back in bed, he’ll just skip you over,” they would warn.

Yeah, right, he thought. He was convinced that their parents were actually Santa and tonight, he was going to prove it. He’d already staked out the living room for the perfect place to hide and catch them in the act. Alicia was going to be sorry for doubting him when she had to do all his chores for the next week.

He put a finger to his lips to make sure his little sister wouldn’t do anything to attract their parents’ attention. Once he was sure she would comply, he nodded toward his hiding place and began to creep over.

The couch was situated in the corner of the living room directly across from the Christmas tree and flanked by large end tables. The bottom of the couch was just high enough that they could lay behind it and watch the room from there without being seen.

Brandon climbed onto the couch and over the back, waving for Alicia to join him.

Alicia hesitated, glancing back toward the stairway, and then to the tree. Just when he feared she might chicken out and go tell on him, she followed him behind the couch and settled in without a sound. He was impressed. Of course, she was probably just that desperate to prove him wrong. Either way, he didn’t care.

They both laid down, their view of the room just slightly diminished from the furniture they hid behind. The brightly-colored lights were hard to miss, though, and Brandon had to admit he still liked watching them. Of course, he’d never admit that to his sister. He wasn’t a baby, after all.

The large tree spanned most of the windowsill, blocking the street lamps and casting shadows all over. He almost laughed as Alicia gripped his hand, but he refused to make a sound. Not until he’d claimed victory.

He glanced around as much as his diminished view would allow, please to note the bulging stocking with his name on it. He tapped Alicia on the shoulder, then pointed to the stocking with an “I-told-you-so” look on his face. Wasn’t “Santa” supposed to fill those? They’d only gone up to bed a little while ago and there’d been no noise, so if there was such a person, he shouldn’t have come yet.

Alicia stuck her tongue out and mouthed, “So?”

She crossed her arms, indicating she wasn’t going anywhere until she was satisfied they had proof one way or another. Brandon just rolled his eyes and

resigned himself to a longer wait. He guessed he should've known it wouldn't be that easy. After all, she was just as stubborn as he was. Sometimes, he kind of liked her because of it.

Brandon turned his attention back to the room, watching the elf village on the coffee table. While he usually thought it was goofy, he had to admit it looked cool in the dark. It was kind of creepy and he suddenly had a bunch of scenarios running through his mind of what they might do if they came to life like dolls in movies.

That would be so awesome, he thought.

Of course, the look on his sister's face would also be pretty cool. She'd probably pee her pants and start crying or something. He grinned, just thinking about how she'd almost cried just going trick-or-treating a couple of months before in that stupid fairy costume.

The time passed so slowly, he felt like he was back in school already, sitting through some boring math class. Soon, he heard a low snoring coming from beside him. He rolled his eyes and nudged her awake, once again putting a finger to his lips to remind her to stay quiet.

Alicia rubbed her eyes, giving him a nasty look. She opened her mouth, but closed it without a word as a strange noise carried through the room. He thought it sounded like hooves or something on the roof. Still, that couldn't be. How on earth would there be something like that on their roof? It was all a story; he'd never seen a single animal, outside of birds, that could fly. Definitely nothing that could make a sound like that.

His sister gripped his hand tight, practically bouncing. He nudged her and gave her a look to settle her down. Whoever it was, they couldn't know anyone was watching. If their parents caught them, they'd been grounded for a week and he wouldn't be able to play his video games. If it was a robber or something.... well, he tried not to think about that possibility.

The noise stopped, and a new one took its place. Brandon followed it, his eyes widening with surprise as he traced the noise to the fireplace he'd been looking at only a little while before.

The stockings shook slightly as the sound grew louder. He could swear something was climbing down the chimney.

No way, he thought.

Maybe something broke and was falling. Yeah, that explanation was the most reasonable one. And the least scary. He might not be the big baby Alicia is, but real live robbers breaking in was pretty scary. Alicia's hold on him got tighter with every second that lay behind the couch listening to the noise. He wondered why his parents weren't hurrying downstairs already. Shouldn't his dad be bursting into the room with a weapon, ready to take care of the intruder?

He almost gasped as a pair of dark boots peeked out from the fireplace. There really was a robber coming in! He clamped a hand over his sister's mouth to keep her from making any noise that might alert the thief to their presence.

This is bad, he thought.

What if the robber didn't just stop down here? What if he went

upstairs and took their parents by surprise? What if he came over to the couch to check for stuff hidden under the cushions? The possibilities were terrifying.

To his confusion, a pair of legs clad in red material with white trim at the bottom now showed through the opening in the fireplace. Did thieves seriously dress like Santa? He didn't think so. Wouldn't that make you pretty noticeable?

Alicia grabbed his arm and started to pull, but Brandon held tight and gave her a look. He barely whispered in her ear, "Shut up, stupid. He'll know we're here."

The robber didn't appear to notice. Maybe his being inside the fireplace still made it hard to hear. Either way, he didn't care, just so long as the strange person didn't see them. He watched as the person climbed all the way out of the chimney, straightening up and stretching.

He was big, with a long, white beard and he wore a red coat with white trim along with that goofy hat. His sister loved those kinds of hats. The man turned back toward the fireplace and produced a large bag from within. He slung the bag, moving toward the large tree.

Brandon's eyes widened, unsure he was really seeing what he thought he was seeing. Would a thief carry a full bag inside a house like that? There was no way there would be room in the thing to stash any of the presents that had been slowly accumulating under the tree for the past couple of weeks.

The man set the bag down in front of the tree, and then opened it. He reached inside and began pulling out brightly-wrapped packages, setting them underneath

the tree. Brandon was beside himself, his heart pounding.

Maybe Alicia was right all along, he thought in wonder.

He got so distracted by the sight before him, that he didn't realize his sister had managed to work loose. To his horror, she climbed over the back of the couch and hurried over to the man.

"Santa," she said. "I told my brother you were real, but he didn't believe me."

"Little girl, what are you doing up this late? Good girls and boys are supposed to be sleeping by now so I can deliver presents."

"I'm sorry, Santa, but he made me! We have a bet. I said you were real, and now he has to do my chores!" Her eyes sparkled as she stood proudly.

"Rebecca, it's not nice to—"

"I'm not Rebecca, Santa." Her face fell at the mistake. "I'm Alicia. And he's Brandon."

Alicia pointed over to the couch. Brandon sighed. They were busted, so he might as well come out of hiding. Little sisters were such a pain. He stood and waved meekly. "Hello."

Santa looked from one to the other, biting his lip. "Oh, my. I'm afraid I have made a terrible mistake. Are you the Rhoades kids?"

"Yes, Santa!" Alicia grinned. "This is so cool! We're actually meeting Santa Clause."

Santa gave them a sad look and began gathering up the presents he'd left under the tree, stuffing them back into his bag. In their place, he walked over to the

fireplace and produced a few small objects from his pocket and dropped them into each kid's stocking.

Alicia frowned. "Santa, what was that?"

"Alicia, don't you know the story?" Brandon rolled his eyes. "He just gave us coal, stupid." Brandon turned back to Santa. "That is what you put in there, right?"

Santa nodded. "Yes, Brandon. I'm afraid it was."

Without another word, he snapped his fingers and a rope appeared around both children. It was quickly followed by a gag, leaving both children unable to speak. Alicia tried to scream, but it was useless. Brandon realized that way before she did, and decided not to waste the effort. Would good would it do?

Besides, he figured this had to be some kind of joke. Santa was some jolly old guy who handed kids presents. He wouldn't hurt them or anything. Just hand them some stupid coal. Brandon decided this had to be one of those things where grown-ups tried to teach kids a lesson by scaring them and he wasn't going to fall for it.

Santa snapped his fingers again, and they were suddenly sitting in a large sleigh on top of the roof. Nine reindeer sat in front of it, all tethered to the sleigh with ropes and other stuff. He was surprised to see one of them really did have a bright red nose.

What was Santa pulling? Where was he going to take them? Brandon, shivered in the cold winter air, wishing he'd worn the warmer pajamas like his parents told him too. He'd insisted he was too

grown-up for those and his blanket would be enough. Now, he realized just how useless the ones he wore were. Of course, Alicia was dressed in her heaviest pajamas. She was too little to choose her own clothes. He used to think that was a bad thing.

Suddenly, Santa appeared in the seat in front. His bag appeared between them in the back. He gave the command, and the reindeer made their way to the next house. He left them sitting in the back, tied up and unable to call for help. Brandon was starting to wish he'd never had the stupid idea to prove Alicia wrong to start with. It wasn't worth it at all.

Santa kept leaving them in the sleigh as he went from house to house. Every minute Brandon spent in the sleigh made the cold even worse. Why hadn't he worn what he was told? If Santa didn't give him a jacket or something soon, this was going to be a long night.

Once again, Santa returned and directed the sleigh into the air. They traveled out of the neighborhood, moving much faster than Brandon thought they could. Before he knew it, they were speeding toward a large building in a place that was even colder than the one they'd come from.

Santa had at least taken pity on him and gave him a heavy jacket to wear. He even gave one to Alicia, but he didn't speak to them at all. Brandon's stomach began to knot up and he wished his parents were there. What was happening? Where were they?

Alicia looked to be just as scared as he was, maybe even more so. Of course she would be. She was a baby, and he was older.

He wasn't scared of anything, not even horror movies. At least, that's what he tried to tell himself as the sleigh landed and Santa took his empty bag inside the building. Why were they still in the sleigh? Was he going to leave them in it forever?

Without the bag in the way, Alicia scooted closer to her brother and gave him a pleading look. It was obvious she wanted him to somehow get them out of this, but Brandon had no idea what he could do. The ropes were too tight to get out of, and he couldn't yell for help with a gag in his mouth, could he?

Brandon decided to take the time to try and figure out where they were, or at least get the description clear in his mind, just in case. Mountains of snow were all around, obscuring most of the landscape. Still, he could see the building Santa retreated to.

It was the biggest place he'd ever seen, and looked like a fancy fortress that kind of reminded him of old castles from the storybooks he likes. It was made of big, heavy materials, but had fancy windows and doors. Lights of all different colors twinkled from these windows, as well as the roof.

A massive Christmas tree sat in front of the building, covered in ornaments, lights, and tinsel. Some brightly-colored boxes sat beneath, and music played from within the building. If he wasn't scared out of his mind, this might be the coolest building he'd ever seen, but he was, so he thought it sucked.

When was someone going to come and get them? he wondered

Just as the thought came to him, a group of people exited the front of the building and made their way toward the sleigh. Brandon's

heart pounded as he hoped the people would finally untie them and tell them it was all a joke to scare them into being good.

Soon, the group was standing right in front of them, all decked out in green outfits with goofy pointed hats that had bells attached to the end. Their shoes were just as weird. The group split into two, with each one picking up a different kid. They carried Brandon and Alicia away from what Brandon thought must be Santa's house.

They traveled through a large wooded area whose trees branches were covered in snow. When they came to a stop, Brandon glanced around and caught sight of a much smaller place that didn't look as cool and fancy as the other one. Brandon wanted to ask if they could go back there, but he figured even if he could talk, that wouldn't do him any good.

It didn't seem like anyone around here liked to talk. The people Brandon had decided must be Santa's elves hadn't said one word since taking them out of the sleigh and they barely even looked at them.

One elf let go of Brandon to open the door before joining the others. The elves carried Brandon and Alicia into the house and set them on a couch. The thing was a bit lumpy and not nearly as nice as the one they had at home. Brandon instantly decided he didn't like this place at all.

Another elf made his way to a large cabinet on one end of the room. Two of his friends followed, each gathering up some wood from inside. They carried it to the fireplace, dropping the wood inside to make a big pile. One of the elves

lit the fire, while another approached them, pointing to a sign to their left.

NO TALKING, it read.

Brandon was thinking up a smart reply about not being able to anyway when the elf took off their gags and put a finger to his lips to reiterate the warning. Brandon just nodded and Alicia followed his lead. The elf then untied them and finally Brandon was able to stand. Stretching felt so good after being forced to sit for so long, he thought it was even better than opening presents on Christmas morning.

Christmas.

Brandon realized it had to be Christmas morning by now and his parents were probably wondering why he and his sister weren't in their room trying to wake them up by now. In fact, if they were home, they might even already be downstairs opening gifts. His mom would likely be cooking in the kitchen. He nearly drooled at the memory of blueberry pancakes and bacon cooking.

The elves left and the click of a lock sliding into place filled the air. Alicia tugged at Brandon's hand. Once she had his attention, she gave him a questioning look. He shrugged. The sign telling them not to talk flitted through his mind. Even if he was willing to disobey, he didn't know what to tell her anyway.

This was definitely not the Santa he'd heard about in storybooks or seen on TV. This Santa was a creepy, scary person who broke into houses and took kids away from their homes. He didn't even let them talk or tell them why they weren't allowed to!

Brandon searched his memories, trying to think of anything that might make their situation make sense. Still, nothing came to mind. He was jolly, laughed a lot, made toys with his elves in the workshop, and had a wife named Mrs. Clause. One day a year, he traveled around the world giving toys to all the good kids, while leaving coal for the bad ones.

Bad kids.

His eyes widened as he remembered the list that Santa had and checked twice every years. Supposedly, he sees all the kids all the time and knew if they did anything wrong. But there was nothing in the stories about taking bad kids away from home. All they were supposed to get is a really lame present.

So what had changed so much? Brandon frowned as he realized that he wasn't always the nicest kid. He did bad things a lot, every year and had never gotten anything other than presents that he assumed were from his parents, no matter what they tried to tell him.

As far as he knew, they did things right. Alicia insisted on leaving milk and cookies on the kitchen table for Santa, and Brandon hadn't touched them. Well, at least not this year. They'd made their list, visited some Santa at a mall, and sent their letters with nice messages on them. So what had they done wrong to change things?

*Now, Brandon, I won't hear another word. You are going to bed and that's it. You don't want Santa to catch you awake do you? He might just skip the house all-together.*

*Alicia pouted. "Brandon, listen to Mommy! I don't want Santa to skip us tonight.*

*Brandon rolled his eyes. "Okay, okay."*

*Shortly after getting tucked in, Brandon got up and slipped into Alicia's room. He gently nudged her and Alicia groaned, covering herself more with her sheet. Brandon shook her harder.*

*"Alicia, wake up," he whispered.*

*"Huh?" Alicia sat up, wiping her eyes. "What are you doing?"*

*"I've got a bet for you! If you win, I'll do all of your chores. If I win, you have to do mine."*

*Alicia pouted. "But I don't wanna do your chores."*

*"I could end up doing yours," he pointed out. "Don't you want to prove that Santa's real?"*

*"He is. Why do I need to get up?"*

*"We're going to sneak downstairs and wait until he comes to bring presents and see for sure." He grinned, a teasing note in his voice as he said, "You do want to prove to me he's real, don't you?"*

*Alicia frowned. "I don't know. I'm tired. Plus, Mommy told us to go to bed, and we shouldn't do something wrong when he's supposed to be coming."*

*"Please, you know Mom and Dad aren't going to leave us without presents on Christmas. Why are you such a baby? Think about it: If you're right, we'll have a really cool story to tell everyone when we go back to school. Maybe we can even get a picture or something.*

*"It might be cool..." Alicia frowned as she considered his offer.*

*"Come on, it'll be fun. We've never been up this late before and I'm not tired. I'm doing it, even if you're too chicken!"*

*Alicia pushed her blanket away and looked up at Brandon. "But, Mommy said that we should be asleep when Santa comes. She tells us that ever year."*

*Brandon took her hand and pulled her out of bed. "Oh, come on already. What's the worst that could happen?"*





**Little Drummer Boy**  
By CP Bialois/Ed White

Luke sat off to the side of the auditorium with his bandmates while a classmate of his (He couldn't remember his name) sang Britney Spears song. Badly. Each time the young man opened his mouth, something akin to what a sick dog sounded like came out.

"Lord, his performance is toxic." Alicia Jones, Luke's girlfriend and guitarist for their band, shook her head as she sat between he and Paul. The motion jingled her multiple earrings of silver and plastic lightning bolts, causing them to resemble cheap wind chimes.

Luke knew she wasn't that she was trying to be mean, but she was nearly always in a bad mood from being a sufferer of other's stupidity. In fact, the only people she got along with was him and their friend and bandmate Paul Stance. They were the only kids in their school with the patience to bore through her fifty mile deep layer of bullshit.

"At least he's almost done," Paul said while keeping his attention on the sports magazine he was reading.

Luke couldn't help smiling and shaking his head in wonder. No matter what Paul read, he never

missed anything happening around him.

"Yeah, and only four to go. Why couldn't Daddy put us first? He's heard us play a thousand times." Alicia crossed her arms and sat back, blowing on a tuft of her black, Joan Jet-like hair that kept falling in front of her eyes and repeated it several more times.

Putting his arm around her shoulders to help comfort her, Luke gave her shoulder a squeeze. "Maybe he wants us to erase the memory of everyone else."

"I guess." Alicia's attention remained on playing with her hair.

"Of course, Mister Jones is the head of the music department. He can't show favoritism." Paul turned a page as his even voice earned him a glare from Alicia, followed by her snatching his magazine and tossing it into a nearby trashcan.

"Maybe Mister Jones can find you another one without showing favoritism." A tug at the corner of Alicia's mouth provided the only hint that she enjoyed doing that.

Luke rubbed the side of his face with his free hand to try hiding his smile. The moment was a welcomed respite from where his mind had been the last couple of days.

Paul remained unreadable as he pushed his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose and scratched the side of his head. "Wish you would've done that sooner. I hate reading about teams blaming the refs for their loss."

Alicia glanced at Paul before turning back to blowing at her hair. "Ass."

Paul smiled. "You know it."

Luke shook his head and chuckled. "Guys, does it bother either of you that you argue like an old married couple? I *am* the boyfriend here."

Alicia smiled as Paul turned to look at Luke. "You are?" Then he turned to Alicia and asked, with mock hope, "Does this mean I get sloppy seconds?"

Luke's mouth dropped open and his mind froze at the turn in the conversation.

Alicia's smile widened as laughter exploded from her. "You only wish."

Paul nodded. "I do. Honest. Lucky firsts, then?"

"While I appreciate your candor, I don't think it's healthy for you to use it with my daughter, Mister Stance."

Luke and his friends were so caught up in their exchange that none of them noticed Alicia's father approach. Dressed in his customary gray slacks, white shirt, and blue tie, Mister Jones looked as threatening as a kitten. All of the students had learned his demeanor didn't match his appearance.

"Uh... no, Sir. We're..." Paul's normally calm and jocular manner evaporated.

"Oh, Daddy. We're just kidding. Honest. You know I'm a good girl."

Luke recognized the tone of Alicia's voice and felt himself flush from embarrassment. It was the same one she used to coax him into risking loss of limb had her father ever caught them. His thoughts drifted to Mister Jones' home office desk and chair before Luke could pull his mind back to the present. Had he not been so shocked, he

would've gapped at Mister Jones' relaxing face.

Though his eyes still looked ravenous, Mister Jones' gentle voice showed his demeanor had shifted. "I know, Princess." He glanced at the handful of people on the other side of the auditorium before turning back and leaning close to Alicia. "I'd prefer if you could keep your voices down. No need to throw the other auditioners off."

Alicia smiled at her father. "Okay, Daddy. If you say so."

Luke watched Alicia's father smile, and then head back to where he'd been sitting. "I thought you were joking about having him wrapped around your finger."

Alicia turned and gave Luke's cheek a quick peck. "Why? He's not so different from you. Except I never—"

"Please don't finish that thought." Paul shook his head and let out a still nervous breath as he rubbed his hair.

Alicia reached out and tussled his short-cropped hair. "I'm sorry, Paulie. I didn't think he could hear us."

Paul waved it off and tried to act like it hadn't really bothered him, but it gave Luke a moment's pause. He still had a lot to think about, and their episode with Alicia's father didn't help.

He glanced at Alicia as she continued reassuring their friend. Yes, they were only eighteen. Yes, they had their whole lives ahead of them. Yes, he and Alicia were one another's first love. Yet, he didn't want anything to change, but he didn't know if he could stop what was coming.

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After their audition, Alicia and Luke decided to celebrate by driving to the park and relax by the lake. While it was small, the park was filled with trees to provide shade and bushes along the boundary to give those wanting to fish, sit and read, or walk the trails as much peace and quiet as possible.

Leaving their car in the ten car parking lot, Luke wanted to enjoy the stillness of the evening at their spot. With his back against the trunk of a weeping willow and Alicia snuggled next to him, he felt truly at peace and calm for the first time in a couple of days.

He knew he had a promise to keep and go to college for a chance at entering the Seminary, and it would affect more than his relationship with Alicia. Their band was growing in popularity despite them being in high school. If they were lucky... He pushed those thoughts aside so he could enjoy the moment. He planned to tell Alicia before they left the park. With three days left before he had to send in his application, it was better late than never.

The lake's surface was calm aside from an occasional ripple from a feeding fish or duck splashing about. Everything was about as perfect as he could've imagined. All he had to do was figure out how to tell her...

"Mmm, this is perfect." Alicia pressed tighter against him and rested her head on his chest.

He nodded. "It is. I don't think anything could be better."

"You know, daddy called a few of his old college friends about us."

Luke didn't like where their conversation was taking them, but he smiled and tried to look as curious as possible. "Oh?"

Alicia nodded, her head slide up and down against him. "He said some of them know people and... This is so weird." She laughed, giving away her nervousness. "They may want to sign us. How cool is that?"

Luke's mind went blank and all he could say was, "Wow."

"You got that right." She paused for a few seconds. "Just think, in a year or two we could be touring with real bands and real singers instead of auditioning for a high school talent show. Our album will be all over the radio."

Luke winced at hearing her hopes and dreams put into words.

"And we can get married soon. Your dad can perform the ceremony and my Daddy won't be able to stop us from screwing our brains out. How's that sound?"

Luke opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. All he could think of was his promise to his mother on her death bed. *Father won't ever talk to me again is I break my word.*

"Are you all right?" Alicia sat up and stared at him. Her concern was etched on her face. "It's too much, too soon, isn't it? I'm sorry... I didn't mean..."

Luke shook his head and placed a finger over her mouth to quiet her. "It's not that. I just... I don't think he'll marry us if..."

"If what? What's with you today? Doesn't he want you to marry me?" Tears welled in her eyes. Luke

wanted to kick himself for being such an idiot.

“No, it’s not that. Before she died, I promised my mom I’d enter the Seminary.”

A wave of confusion swept over Alicia’s face and mixed with her other emotions. Luke remained quiet to give the words a chance to sink in. After a minute, she spoke.

“How long?”

He swallowed. “I have until Monday to send in my application.” Until he uttered the words, her eyes were as confused as he’d ever seen them. Now, that one word brushed all emotions aside except her pain, but even that quickly shifted.

“Monday? Are you fucking serious? When were you going to tell me about this? Today? Sunday night after you got your rocks off again? You son of a bitch!”

“I don’t have to leave until the end of the year—“

Her fist found his nose to silence him, then his groin.

Holding himself while swallowing and trying to will away the tears, she shoved him away before climbing to her feet.

“You were going to leave me. Leave us! You bastard! Go! Maybe they’ll have more mercy on your soul than I will.”

He heard her shoes crunching the leaves as she hurried away from him, but by the time he looked for where she went she was out of sight. He drove, which meant she’d probably walk home. Luke tried to call out to her a few times, but between the pain and his heart pounding in his ears his voice sounded weak and distant.

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Three days.

It’d been three days since Alicia left him in the park and everything in his life seemed to collapse around him. Normally an outgoing person, Luke refused to leave the house since, often claiming he didn’t feel well. It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t the entire truth either.

He’d shut everyone out of his life for the most part. He even went so far as to ignore Paul the first few times he called to check up on him. The last thing Luke needed was to have someone else reading him the riot act about keeping his promise. He knew Alicia considered him selfish, and probably so did Paul. He couldn’t blame them after the way he handled things, but how could he be the selfish one if he was keeping a promise to his mother?

None of it felt right to him. Maybe that was why he answered the phone when Paul called the previous night. Luke reasoned he was looking to serve his penance for his actions, but Paul never mentioned it. Surprised and wary, Luke had asked him if he’d seen Alicia.

Paul replied, “Yeah, she’s been acting strange. You know, not saying much of anything.”

Luke closed his eyes and gritted his teeth at hearing that. Alicia rarely spoke to anyone but him and Paul. If she was barely talking to Paul, then chances were Paul didn’t know.

Just as he decided to take Paul’s ignorance as a silver lining, Paul said, “You ready for Monday night?”

Luke’s heart seized and climbed into his throat. “Monday night?” He was surprised his voice sounded normal. He half expected it to be a croak of some kind.

Paul didn’t seem to notice. “Yep. You didn’t forget about the talent show, did you, buddy? It’s a slam dunk we’re going to win.”

While they continued talking about what songs they were going to play, Luke couldn’t shake the idea Alicia was going to force him to tell Paul one way or another. Had she been anyone else, he would’ve thought she was planning on embarrassing him before or after their performance by making him admit he was leaving in front of everybody. Part of him refused to set that thought aside no matter how out of character it seemed for her.

“Yeah, man. We should be cool. Alicia said her throat’s bothering her and she wants to rest it for the show. Sounds like a good idea given she looks like hell. Guess you guys caught the same bug, huh?”

“Yeah, I think she got the worst of it, though.” He could hear Paul’s smile on the other end of the line.

“Yeah, leave it to you to let a girl out man you.”

Luke pressed end on his cell phone a few minutes later and stared at the red and white streaked screen. *So, everything’s in place.* He mulled over what to do for a few more minutes. He struggled whether to go and let down Paul and her once more, or stay home and refuse to answer his phone. The only bad part was he had to go back to school at some point.

*Why can’t we just move?* He rubbed his face with his palms as a

vision of Alicia gyrating on top of him came to mind. “No, no, no, no, no. Do *not* think of her like that.” She was everything him and thinking of her like that after what he did make his stomach clench.

After a couple of minutes, all he could think of, was how to lessen her pain. It as a task he knew was impossible, but he wanted, no, needed to fix his screw up. Telling her he wasn’t applying and would stay would probably do the trick. At least, it worked in those TV shows.

“Oh God, now I’m taking advice from soaps” He clamped his hands over his face and fell backwards onto his bed. Following that idea was the last thing he wanted. It took him a whole day for him to pee without any pain after she punched him. The only saving grace was his nose was fine and unbruised.

As luck would have it, he’d had the TV on for background noise and a teen drama on. He glanced at the TV in time to see that very same trick work to bring the couple together once again. The woman forgave her dipshit boyfriend and they kissed. Luke threw his remote at the TV, luckily hitting the power button and turning it before any more damage could be done.

“At least, I can do something right.” He let out a sigh and covered his face with his hands.

Two knocks sounded on his door before it opened. “Son, Mind if I come in?”

Luke shrugged and motioned to nothing in particular. “Sure, go ahead.”

Blake Campbell walked past his prone son and took a seat in the desk chair with his hands clasped in

his lap. “So, you three more days to send in your application.”

Luke remained silent aside from a, “Yep.”

“Son, I’m talking to you as your father, not a reverend, okay?”

Luke shrugged, continuing to cover his face with his hands. *Why can’t he leave me alone?* He knew the thought was unfair as his father had done exactly that except for a couple of one or two word questions (Luke had replied in kind), but talking was the last thing he wanted to do right then.

Blake nodded. “Good. Now, it’s with all the love in my heart that I ask, what in the hell’s the matter with you, boy?”

Luke removed his hands and propped himself up in shock. He’d only heard his father talk like that when he was pissed off.

His father pointed at him. “And don’t give me none of that, ‘I’m fine’, crap. I know you better than that. Ever since Alicia dumped you, you’ve been a moody pain in the ass! It happens, Son. But that doesn’t mean you get to take it out on everyone else.”

Luke struggled to process everything. In the end, all he could say was, “How?”

His father chuckled. “Son, no man comes home walking around as gingerly as you did unless you crossed the line with some girl. Since the police never came, I’m guessing it was Alicia and she put you straight.”

Luke paused for a second trying to think of what to say. He kept his mouth closed and nodded.

“And I’m also guessing you didn’t tell her about your plans until just before that. Am I right?”

Luke clenched his jaw and fell back on his bed. “I thought it’d be easier to wait. But I *did* tell her—“

“With only a few day’s notice.”

“Yeah, with only a few day’s notice. Then she kicked my ass and left me.”

His father nodded. “Son, we didn’t raise you to follow any one religion. We let you make your won choice.”

“I know, but—“

His father held up a hand, stopping Luke from going further. “The point is, why do you want to go to Seminary College?”

Luke stared at his father for a minute unsure how to respond. All of his life, things had been cut and dry. All of that was being thrown out the window. “Mom made me promise just before she died.”

“Son, remember you’re mother was full of pain medication for her cancer? There were times she thought I was her father and you were me, right?”

“Yeah. Sometimes she could think straight and others...” Luke’s voice trailed off as the four-year-old memories still carried an enormous power. He saw tears well in his father’s eyes as he nodded.

“That day was one of her worst. Especially the hours before she joined the Lord. She was raised a Catholic and her mother made your Uncle Clyde promise the same thing before she died. You see what I’m saying, Son?”

Luke understood, but he didn't like the way his stomach and heart ached at the thought.

"What I mean is, I don't know what she truly wanted besides for you to be happy. I'm sorry." His father's eyes dropped to look at the floor before he raised them to lock onto Luke's "I should've seen why you decided to apply, but I didn't. I've been foolish and lost in my own thoughts. Do you think she would hold you to a promise that didn't make you happy?"

Luke's eyes widened. "Oh my God. Alicia! I've been such an idiot!"

His father smiled as he stood and walked to the bedroom door. "Tis the season. Besides, women to that to us, Son. Now give the girl a call." He paused before stepping out of the room and looked back. "Oh, and Luke?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't tell her I said that part about women. I'm too damn old to hobble around like you."

Before the door was closed, Luke had his cell phone out and pressed the call button for Alicia's phone. After a couple of rings, it went to voicemail. *I'm not surprised. She'll never want to talk to me again.* "Alicia, please, don't hang up. I need to talk to you. It's important. Please, I've been such an idiot. Meet me at our spot at eight o'clock. Okay? Please come. I love you."

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Although it was spring, the night air was colder than it'd been for the last couple of weeks. Each breath Luke let out turned into mist, but he didn't notice. All he could think of was Alicia. His heart nearly stopped

when he saw a pair of headlights pull into the parking lot.

He took a step forward when he saw the lights go out, but he forced himself to wait. As hard as he tried, Luke couldn't keep his heart from pounding in his chest. When he saw Alicia approach wearing her favorite *Misfits* shirt and jeans, he had to remind himself to breathe.

She stopped just inside the edge of the weeping willow's dangling branches and wiped her eyes. "I wasn't going to come." She held her hand up to silence Luke before he said a word. "Don't. I need to get this out." Luke nodded and she moistened her lips. "I came, because I thought of what I said about you just wanting another lay. I was wrong, but you hurt me. I just wanted to tell you that."

"Alicia, I... I'm not applying." *There. I said it. My life is now a crappy novel and teen drama.*

Alicia remained quiet for a second, then shook her head. "No, don't you dare. Not for me, not after what you put me through."

She took a step back and Luke reached out, but didn't move toward her. After they were so willing to move before, his feet now seemed frozen as if they were stuck in cement. "Don't go, please. I'm not staying for you. I mean, I am, but my mom didn't recognize me when I promised." He winced at how idiotic he sounded. *It definitely made more sense in my head.*

Alicia didn't move for a second as she stared at him. Then the anger he saw a couple of days before was back. She closed the distance between them in four strides. "You want to keep playing games? What's wrong with you?"

Instead of backing away like his instincts begged him to do, he stood his ground. If she was going to punch him again, then he'd deal with it. "Look, I know it sounds dumb. It's stupid, I'm stupid. I admit it. I've been the world's biggest ass. I just... I just want to be happy with you."

Alicia's face screwed up as she appeared to want to say something, but she closed her mouth for a couple of seconds before finally saying, "So, you're not leaving us?"

A smile played across Luke's face. "No, I'm not. Nothing is worth losing you." He paused for a second as he thought over her comment. "Or Paul."

"She shook her head while keeping her eyes locked on his. "Please, no more games."

Luke reached out and took hold of her shoulders. "No more games. I promise."

Her face clouded with a war of emotions before she jumped into him, nearly knocking them both over. She wrapped her arms around neck and washed his neck with her tears. "I thought you really wanted one last fling. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Luke wrapped his arms around her. "No, I'm sorry. I couldn't have screwed things up any worse if I'd tried."

"I'm glad you're not leaving us."

A laugh escaped from him. "What's the deal with all this 'us' stuff? I don't think Paul would care that much. He may want to knock me out..." As his voice trailed off with a smile, she stepped back.

Her own smile radiated her relief and a hint of mischief as she shook

her head. “My God, you *are* an idiot.” She took one of his hands and rested it against her stomach.

For the first time, he felt the slight bulge. “Jesus. How didn’t I know?”

Alicia laughed at him. “You’re an idiot, like you said. You never pay attention to hints. I couldn’t figure out how to tell you any other way.”

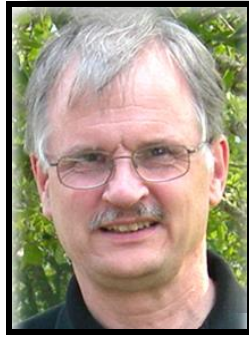
Luke’s smile widened until it threatened to cut his face in two. “Do you know when?”

She nodded. “Two months ago. I’m due around Christmas. My little drummer boy is going to be a daddy.”

As soon as the rush of happiness came it ended. “Speaking of daddy...”

“It’s why he’s been calling around about our band.”

Suddenly, everything she’d been telling him for weeks made sense. He didn’t know if he would’ve noticed had he not been so wrapped up in himself, but it didn’t matter. He had a new promise to keep.



### Joe’s Story By Rick Weber

In June Joe Pearson’s wife, Adele, passed away following a long bout with cancer. They had been married for 37 years, and Joe retired from the Post Office three years earlier to care for her. Now, in December, he was in no mood to celebrate. Driving to the airport two days before Christmas in the morning rush hour was brutal, and only made him more depressed. He could have gone with his children and their families to Orlando for the Holidays instead of driving them to the airport, but he chose to stick it out at home this year. He was still in this darkest stage of grief, and those closest to him were well aware of it.

Joe’s son, Ted and his daughter Margie planned the trip to Disney World shortly after their mother died, and they begged Joe to come along. Margie was able to rent a large house in Lake Kissimmee where he would have had his own room with a separate bath. It would have cost him nothing, but Joe would hear nothing of it. They left the door open for him to come along up until the night before when they had to check in with the airline on line. Yet, Joe still turned down their request telling them that he had to be home to plant flowers on Adele’s grave Christmas Day.

Joe had everything to be proud of. His kids had done well for themselves. Ted was a CPA with a good practice. His wife Julie was an attorney in a big law firm, and they had two sons. Margie was a stay at home mom with three daughters. Her husband, Bill, was a computer engineer who made this possible, and he even bought her a large passenger van for her duties as a Girl Scout leader. Joe used it to get everyone to the airport. Now, he was glad to be parking it in his garage. It reminded him too much of the mail truck he used to drive.

Inside the foyer of his quiet residence Joe looked around. Not a single decoration was up. No tree, no wreaths, no lights; nothing to show it was Yuletide. It was the first moment of total silence Joe had in years, and he had no plans. In stark contrast to past Christmases celebrated in this home when the decorations outside made it the biggest attraction in the neighborhood; the lights outlining the entire frame of the house, the Nativity display on the lawn, and Santa’s sled on the roof could not be outdone. Last year, Joe had gone all out by laying out a train garden throughout the first floor inside the house passing by the bay window in the living room for the entire world to see. It brought the biggest smile to Adele’s face that Joe had ever seen. Those decorations now were in boxes in the basement, attic, and garage.

Joe remembered going to church last Christmas Eve with Adele and begging God to spare her, but it did not happen. In March, she had her last round of chemotherapy which only made her feel worse with Joe by her side during all of it. In May, Adele went



into Hospice Care when Joe could no longer tend to all of her needs. Joe, standing at her bedside when she finally succumbed to the dreaded disease, found himself numb by the doctor's pronouncement.

After the funeral, he sent out thank you notes to people for their expressions of sympathy. With the help of Margie and Julie, he cleaned the house and donated Adele's clothing and other personal items to charity. He ordered and took delivery of her headstone. Alone and looking at the granite marker for the first time, Joe broke down in tears and cried out, "Where was God when you needed him?" After prodding from his kids, Joe had his will re-written. Now in December, he realized he was alone, and asked himself, "Now, what am I gonna do?" Before he could decide, Joe heard a knock at the front door. It was Michael, the next door neighbor's teenage son, holding a covered dish in front of him. "Come on in," Joe beckoned.

Stepping inside Michael said, "My mother just made a batch of those cookies you like, and she wanted you to have them while they're still hot out of the oven."

Joe closed the door. "Well, tell your mom, thanks. You got me at a good time. I just came back from dropping Ted, Margie, and their broods off at the airport. They're going to the Magic Kingdom. What are you doing for Christmas?"

Handing Joe the cookie dish, Michael let out a sigh and his shoulders drooped. "I'm doing community service hours for school at the church mission both on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Not my idea of fun."

"What will they have you doing at the mission?"

"Christmas Eve, I'm one of Santa's Elves giving out presents to the kids, and on Christmas Day, I'll be serving dinner to the families."

"Michael, that's great! You'll be helping out a lot of less fortunate people."

Michael shuffled his feet and let out a groan, "That's what my parents said. If you think it's so good, why don't you try it?"

Without hesitating, Joe answered, "I might. What time do the festivities start tomorrow night?"

"Things kick off at seven," Michael grumbled.

On Christmas Eve, Joe arrived early at the mission to see some people already lined up outside the front door. Looking down at the far end of the building, Joe saw Michael standing by a side door with some of his friends.

Michael's face lit up when he saw Joe and he said, "I didn't think you'd show up."

"Well, I'm here. I've known you since you were in diapers. Have I ever let you down? Now, what can I do to help?"

"Let's go inside. I want you to meet Brother Paul. He runs the place. He'll get you squared away."

Michael and Joe made their way back into the kitchen where a tall beefy man in a red flannel shirt and blue jeans about Joe's age stood with his back to them talking to a couple. "Brother Paul," Michael interrupted. "I have someone I want you to meet."

Brother Paul turned, and Joe saw a San Damiano cross around

his neck and an infectious broad smile on his face. "And who would that be, Michael?"

Without any further help, Joe spoke up with an outstretched hand, "Brother Paul, I'm Joe Pearson, Michael's neighbor. I understand you could use some help here tonight and tomorrow."

Brother Paul pumped Joe's hand firmly. "We can always use some help. What brings you out on Christmas Eve?"

Joe quickly replied. "My kids are out of town with their families, and it got kind a lonely at home."

Brother Paul loosened his grip. "If you don't mind working in the kitchen, we'll be glad to have you. We'll be serving a light dinner, soup and sandwiches, before the pageant starts. Some of these folks haven't eaten all day and that includes the kids."

"Let me hang up my coat," Joe said as Brother Paul took him back and introduced him to the other volunteers while Michael went off with his friends to don their elf hats.

Joe helped get the serving line ready just in time for the doors to open. Over the next two hours, he worked with the others serving food to a couple hundred people who had no place else to go. The grateful looks on their faces was all Joe needed to see.

Brother Paul watched the food line dwindle down to only a couple of adults waiting, and he walked to the front of the dining room picking up a microphone. "Merry Christmas, everyone! Have you all had something to eat?" Every head in the room nodded, "Good, since we didn't have a chance to say Grace, let's bow our heads now to

give thanks.” The room fell quiet as Brother Paul gave a quick invocation. After he finished, the sound of bells jingling could be heard from the back of the room followed by the booming words, “HO! HO! HO!”

Santa appeared at the door and walked down the main aisle waving to the families seated at tables on either side. Making his way up to Brother Paul, they shook hands and Brother Paul handed him the microphone. Santa asked, “Have you all been good boys and girls?”

“YES!” came the loud unified response.

“GOOD! Let’s get started. I have a lot of others places to visit tonight.”

Santa sat on a large chair at the end of the aisle. With the help of his elves, he read a child’s name from the tag on the first gift, and asked if that child was in the dining room. A shy little girl about three or four years old stood up next to her mother, who took her by the hand down the aisle to see Santa.

In the back of the dining hall while Santa passed out gifts, Brother Paul joined Joe who was stacking trays by the kitchen door. “You have quite an operation here, Brother Paul.”

“I know. I hope we can keep it going.”

“Why is that?” Joe asked the cleric in a pressing tone.

“Over the past year, some of our benefactors had to cut back on their support. The economy has been tough on everyone. To boot, we have more people asking for help this year than in the past. The factory closing in town last month right before Thanksgiving put a lot

of people out of work. Some, who worked in the plant and helped out last year, were in line for turkeys this time. We didn’t have to turn anyone down, but I knew we really had to pull out all the stops if we wanted Christmas to be a success. After New Year’s it’s going to get tougher with all the local agencies going after fewer resources.”

“Maybe, I can give you a hand, Brother Paul. I used to have a mail route near here. I might be able to reach out to some of my old business customers to see what they can do.”

“Like I told you, we can always use help, but right now it looks like Santa wants mine,” Brother Paul told Joe pointing to Santa who finished passing out gifts and was waving the friar up to the front of the room to conclude the program.

Joe finished up a little after midnight and walked out of the building with Michael and his friends. Before getting into his car, he told them, “See you tomorrow.”

Early the next morning Joe called Ted and Margie to wishing all of them in Orlando, a Merry Christmas. “You’re up early,” Margie said to her father when she answered the phone.

“I wanted wish all of you a Merry Christmas before you took off for Cinderella’s Castle,” Joe retorted hearing laughter in the background.

“You’re sounding chipper. What have you been up to?” Margie asked.

“I was over at the mission last night with Michael from next door. I served food, and it looks like I’ll be doing the same today. They sure need support.” Joe outlined to Margie, and later during the same

call to Ted, his conversation with Brother Paul and his plans to help the mission.

Ted listened quietly to what his father had to say before speaking. “Dad, they do a lot of good work. I may be able to give you a hand finding donors when we get back, but right now, I’ve got an appointment to see the Seven Dwarfs.” Hearing his grandchildren yelling in the background for his son to hurry up, Joe thanked Ted for his interest and hung up before the cries got any louder.

Joe returned to the mission and saw many of the same people who were there the night before in line for Christmas dinner. He joined Michael and his friends in the kitchen to lay out the feast. It was another great day for Joe, who enjoyed giving to those in need. As the day was winding down, he was able to sit down with Brother Paul to eat. Joe promised to be back in touch after he contacted his old mail customers.

Between the Holidays, Joe went over his old route. He was surprised to see that some of the smaller businesses had folded, along with a couple of larger ones. A market was Joe’s first potential prospect. He found the place still run by Lionel, a gregarious old man who was the fourth generation of his family in the grocery business.

“Joe, I thought you were retired. I wish I were in your shoes,” Lionel shouted when he saw Joe at the customer service desk.

“I am, but I’m volunteering at the mission. Do you have a few minutes to talk?”

“For you, old friend, yes.”

Lionel took Joe back into his office for a private discussion. “Lionel, I chipped in at the mission on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. They’re in a tight situation and could use a hand. I know you get hit up all the time by different groups, especially at this time of year...”

Before he could go on, Lionel broke in. “Joe, you’re right. I get solicited a lot for donations, and I do what can. That mission, from what I’ve seen, does a lot of good work. So, what do they need?”

“They definitely need food. They have a lot of mouths to feed. As for the other things, I’m not quite sure. I just started looking around to see what resources are available. If don’t mind, I can bring Brother Paul, who oversees the place, here to see you. He’s the best person to talk to.”

“That sounds good. Give me a call sometime next week so we can meet one day before I open up,” Lionel told his friend. “That will give me time to talk to some of the other business owners in town to see what they can do.”

“Lionel, that’s great!” Joe said in a loud voice as he stood up to shake Lionel’s hand before leaving.

Joe put in more time between the holidays working in the food line and touching base with potential sponsors. He met every day with Brother Paul, to discuss the results of those contacts. Brother Paul was impressed with Joe’s work. But one day during a briefing, Brother Paul looked at his watch and asked Joe, “Don’t you have to be someplace now?”

Joe, a bit befuddled, replied, “No, I don’t think so. My

appointments are all done for today.”

Brother Paul smiled, looked Joe in the eye, and softly whispered to him, “The airport.” Without making any comments, Joe ran out of the mission, and after switching vehicles at his house, he sped to the airport in Margie’s van. He pulled up to the baggage claim area just in time to see everyone walking out of the terminal, each wearing a pair of Mickey Mouse ears.

As winter became spring, Joe learned, not only, more about working at a charity, but also, more about himself. In June on the first anniversary of Adele’s passing, he visited the cemetery.

Standing over the freshly mown grass at Adele’s grave, he began his usual out loud conversation when visited the cemetery. “I still miss you, Kid. I’m doing okay. I told you about helping out at the mission. It’s going pretty good there. I’m meeting a lot of good people. They’re in bad shape; no jobs, nothing to eat. I thought it was tough with your cancer, but when I see so many people with so little, I’m glad to be there. I wish you were with me to be part of it all. I know it’s not possible. Here’s look-in’ at you, Kid. I gotta run. I have to meet Brother Paul. We’re setting up a fund raiser.” Joe, with a spring in his step, made it back to his car and waved good-bye to Adele from inside it before driving off.



## Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer

By DiVitto Kelly

“Well, well, well, if it ain’t Rudolph the beer-nosed reindeer,” smirked Mr. Stanley Smith, a portly elf who stood a shade under four-feet tall. He was police chief for Santa Inc. at the North Pole.

“More like pickled, I’d say,” added constable Wally Wesson, lean, and vertically challenged like his station brethren. He removed the leash from the reindeer’s corralled collar. “Same cell as usual?”

“Yeah,” replied Smith. “I better give the Big Man a holler; he’s not gonna be happy about this – again.”

“No, no, no,” pleaded Rudolph, looking ratty and unkempt. “I prom—”

“Let me finish for you,” barked Smith. “Promise. I promise it won’t happen again.” They’d been burned before, letting Rudolph scamper unbeknownst to Santa the last time he was busted for FWI, flying while intoxicated.

The celebrity red-honker heartthrob begged. “I swear it this time, cross my hooves.”

“You’ve crossed them before,” chimed Wesson. “Why in the name of Sam the Snowman would you purposely ruin the best gig in the whole wide world? And for what, booze and does? I mean; you got it all.”

“Wesson, this here reindeer don’t give a Bumble’s ass,’ added Smith, who’d seen his fair share of reindeer shenanigans. “The problem is you flying bastards think you’re all above the law, and quite frankly, better than anyone else around here. Well, I’m here to inform you that you ain’t”

“I can change; just give me one more chance.” The reindeer slumped down on the wafer-thin mattress. His booze-soaked noggin was pounding like a jackhammer.

“Yeah,” interjected Wesson. “Like ya’ll are some new and improved flying reindeer: bigger, smarter, faster . . .”

“That’s the tag line for Deep Blue Sea, you bunion head!” barked Smith. “Ya’ll?”

“Sorry Chief,” shrugged Wesson, a close relative of Mrs. Claus and complete sympathy hire.

Smith scoffed. “You and your elk, I mean ilk. Young bucks like you are gonna end up joining the 27 Club like those crazy rock musicians that died at the age of twenty-seven: Jim Morrison of the Doors, Jimi Hendrix, Kurt Cobain, Janis Joplin. All that talent; and for what?”

“Let’s not forget about what happened to Santa’s other leading reindeer, the one before you, Rudy” added Wesson.

“What other one?” asked Rudolph, beginning to sober up in the drunk tank.

Smith shook his head. “What, you think Santa and his magical flying reindeer started with you leading the famous eight? Prancer, Dancer, Donner, Vixen . . .” He paused, snapping his fingers at his partner. “Come on help me out, kiddo.”

“Uh, sorry boss,” replied Wesson. “There’s Dasher and Blitzen, Hobbit, and Cue Ball . . .”

“You’re an absolute mess,” said Smith, fully irked. “Maybe All-Star here needs a scared straight moment. This was supposed to remain confidential, but I think you need to know about . . . him.”

Rudolph struggled to all fours, feeling like he had a layer of cotton on his tongue. The normally shiny red nose had all the festive luster of a Walter Mondale speech. He approached the metal bars in the eight-by-eight cell. “Tell me Chief Smith. Please. Tell me what happened to . . . him.”

“Are you sure you want to hear it?” countered Smith, biting down on a poppy seed toasted bagel. He grimaced. “You CANNOT get a good bagel up here in the Pole, Chinese food either.”

Rudolph’s glazed eyes zeroed on the chief. “I want to know the truth.”

“You can’t handle the truth,” barked Smith. He tossed the bagel in the garbage can and reached on his tippy toes for the box of cinnamon frosted Pop Tarts stationed on top of the microwave. He took a great big crescent-shaped bite and grinned. Satisfied, he pulled up his chair to the metal bars.

“Alright, Rudy,” said Smith, dropping a few crumbs to the floor.

“See, you’ve been cradled ever since the Big Man selected you to head the sleigh team all those years ago. But when you started getting into trouble, Santa simply gave you a harmless slap on the hoof or time out session. THAT was a waste of time. What you really needed was a hefty dose of granite hard discipline.”

Smith inched closer to the bars and glared at Rudolph. He rolled up his right shirt sleeve revealing a tattoo of a reindeer. “You see this?”

Rudolph focused his bleary eyes in for a closer inspection. “Albert . . . Ross? Who is Albert Ross?”

“Albert Ross? What the hell; are you still loaded or something? That says Albatross.”

Wesson peered in, lifting up his spectacles. “Sir, your arm’s kinda flabby so I can see how Rudy here thought the second A could be misinterpreted as an E, and the T . . .”

“Get away from me, you simpleton,” said Smith, exasperated, throwing up his little arms. ‘That my friend was THE lead reindeer; Santa’s former number one flying ace.”

“How come I’ve never heard of him?” asked Rudolph.

Wesson picked up a matching wood stool and placed it close to the bars next to his boss. The two looked at each other, blurting out ‘it’s a long story’ in unison.

“Well, I’m not going anywhere soon, so lay it on me Five-O,” replied the reindeer.

“I’ll take it from here, constable,” said Smith. He crunched his knuckles and tipped his cap up.

“Albatross was the King Kong of flying reindeer -- had a poster of him in my bedroom when I was a kid. He was a role model to many of us elves. After I graduated from the police force—“

“And celebrated with a few adult beverages,” jabbed Wesson.

“Ha, ha,” sneered Smith. “Yeah, I got this cool tattoo.” The circular stamp showed off an impressive looking reindeer sporting sunglasses. “I’m telling you Rudy, THAT reindeer was bigger than life.”

“Nice ink,” said Rudolph, his bloodshot eyes wide open in amazement. “And who was King Kong?”

“Only the baddest ape on the planet!” boasted Wesson, who’d devoured his fair share of simian-themed movies. “Until those evil meanies took him away from his island home. It’s such a sad tale . . . “

“Never mind the chimp story,” shot Smith. “The legend goes that this mysterious reindeer, Albatross, came out of nowhere to become head of Santa’s flying fleet. He had such skill and stamina; made the rounds quicker than anyone before. That sucker could fly to the moon so help me God!”

“Fly me to the moon,” crooned Wesson, with his outstretched arms and big boastful grin. Rudolph smiled. The chief only stared, not uttering a word.

“What, you never heard of Sinatra, ole blue eyes? I Did It My Way?”

“Your way is the idiot way, now cut the cackle,” barked Smith.

Wesson pouted, “My apologies.”

“Don’t be,” said Rudolph. “You have a lovely singing voice.”

Wesson perked up with a smile. “I do karaoke every Friday night.”

The chief shook his head. “You must be hearing double, Rudy,” smirked Smith. “May I get back to the story, please?”

“I heard the other reindeer were jealous of Albatross, isn’t that right, Boss?” probed Wesson.

“Jealous is an understatement,” said Smith. “The others thought he was just plain arrogant, reckless, and didn’t put in the proper training. Thing was, Albatross was so damn good right from the get go. He really didn’t need to buckle down. When he took the reins, it was like having Santa’s sleigh being drawn by a Ferrari.”

“What’s with the name?” asked Rudolph. “It’s kinda silly, isn’t it?”

Smith sighed. “Well, the first time we busted him, we discovered his actual name was Rupert. He was embarrassed by it.”

“We swore we’d never tell a soul,” said Wesson.

Smith continued. “He thought it lacked the necessary magnetism for such a spectacular flying reindeer so he legally changed it. Albatross was also a big Samuel Taylor Coleridge fan; loved the guy’s poetry. Took the name from that famous poem of his, uh what’s the name?”

“That would be Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” chimed Wesson, an English major dropout from UNP, the University of North Pole.

Smith craned his neck at his fellow employee, surprised at his burst of intelligence. “Yeah, that

Albatross was a wicked smart reindeer.”

“The name Rupert isn’t so bad,” said Rudolph. “It’s kinda sounds like my name.”

“And there lies the predicament, young buck,” said Smith. “You are becoming just like him, if not already.”

“The groupies, booze, does, late night partying, did I mention does?” added Wesson. “By the way, whatever happened to Clarisse? I thought you two were a steady item?”

Rudolph took a sip of water from the stainless steel bowl on the cement floor. “Nah, it didn’t work out. She wanted marriage and I wanted . . .”

“Does,” answered Wesson.

Rudolph shrugged his weary shoulders then shifted over to the beat up mattress to lie down. “I’m a mess, aren’t I?”

“By admitting you have a problem indicates . . .” said Wesson.

“Zip it, Lucy,” said Smith.

“Lucy? Why Lucy?” asked Wesson, puzzled.

“From the Peanuts cartoons. She did that psychiatric help thing for a nickel, oh never mind,” snapped the police chief, thinking his partner’s nuttiness was starting to rub off on him. Smith had given up late night coffee breaks, replacing them with Sleepy Time chamomile tea. The soothing properties didn’t seem to be meshing well with his permanent aggregated state. “Can we get back to booze hound here?” Rudolph grumbled.

“Continue,” said Wesson.

“Thank you,” said Smith. “The problem was Albatross became more popular than Santa up here in the Pole. He was like a rock star. Kids wanted his autograph. Elves wanted to catch a ride on his sturdy back. And the does . . .”

“They wanted to ride too,” giggled Wesson.

The boss laughed. “Oh yeah. You could surmise he was Elvis before there was Elvis.” Smith took a long drag from his vapor cigarette. He was a sea of bad vices just waiting to continue.

“Bigger than Santa?” answered Rudolph almost in awe. “How could anyone be bigger than Santa? I mean; he’s beloved by millions of people all over the world?”

“You’re missing the point, beer nose,” said Wesson.

“That’s red nose,” snapped Rudolph.

“Whatever kid,” replied Wesson.

“Constable, since we’re gonna be here for a while, why don’t you pick up a couple of large pepperoni pies from Bumbles Pizza for all of us? My treat. You like pepperoni, Rudolph?”

“Yeah, but it gives me the winds,” snickered Rudolph. The other reindeer aren’t too keen when their fearless leader turns on the flatulence.”

“Hey, didn’t you used to do commercials for Hermey’s SkyHigh Chili restaurant chain? I bet that musta been problematic for the other reindeer,” snorted Wesson.

“Oh yeah,” replied Rudolph. “I would double down on the grated cheese topping and inhale a couple

of hotdogs with extra onions before practice. Talk about turbo action! The gang wouldn’t speak to me for a week!” laughed the reindeer, his good nature surfacing.

“So no pepperoni?” asked Wesson, meekly. He loved pepperoni.

“Oh go ahead,” said Rudolph. I’m sure my blood alcohol level is still hovering around the point-four range so I won’t be flying anywhere too soon.” All three burst out laughing.

Wesson was all giddy. He grabbed the cash from Smith in his little hand and scampered out the door.

“You just made his day,” said Smith with a grin.

Rudolph was still dumbfounded. “Chief, you were saying that Albatross became more popular than Santa? I just don’t see how that’s possible.”

“See, Albatross was smooth as silk and real charismatic. It didn’t take long for everyone here in the Pole to adore him. And the fawns? Boy did they fawn all over him, no pun intended.”

“We all have our vices,” beamed Rudolph.

Smith continued. “Santa on the other hand has an ego the size of Australia. And even with all the books, poems, movies, songs, and millions of children kissing his rear end come December, it just wasn’t enough. If he can’t be the big Magilla up here in the Pole, well, there’s gonna to be a problem.”

“So what are you saying? Did Santa reprimand Albatross?”

Smith leaned in. “If reprimand means having ‘associates’

rearrange a few leg bones then yes, he was reprimanded.”

“That’s horrible,” replied the naïve reindeer. “Is he, you know -- dead?”

“Nah, the Big Man ain’t that cruel, just a big proponent of loyalty and tough love,” sided Smith. “Sometimes Santa needs to remind folks around here who’s in charge.”

“So where is Rupert, I mean Albatross now?”

“I believe he ended up at some petting zoo in New Jersey. You see, once a reindeer breaks a leg, they can’t fly no more,” said Smith. He took off his hat and scratched his graying crewcut. “For some reason, the bad eggs always seem to end up in Jersey.”

Rudolph gulped. “You think Santa’s associates might, you know, break my legs?”

“Nah.” Rudolph sighed. “Probably just bust up your snot locker a bit.” The police chief laughed. “But seriously, if you don’t get your act together ASAP, you’ll be residing in the Garden State, too,” said Smith.

“Garden State? That actually sounds rather nice. I like flowers, especially zinnias. They’re quite tasty.”

“Rudy, it ain’t no garden, trust me. You could end up somewhere off the Turnpike. And trust me; you don’t want to be there.”

-----  
 Meanwhile at Bumble’s Pizza, Wesson waited patiently at the bar. He nursed a ginger ale and listened to background elf banter.

“About ten more minutes,” grumbled Bumble, who was still

having issues with his molasses slow staff. It didn't help that his toothy new grill was slipping again. "Damn Poligrip."

Just as Wesson dropped a couple of quarters in the jukebox, Santa burst through the door. "Has anyone seen Rudolph? He's late again for practice and I can't seem to find him anywhere in this blasted frozen tundra."

All the elves turned quiet. "Senor Bumble, you have the best view of the Pole, have you seen him?"

Bumble shook his head, "No."

"Rats," said Santa.

"But Wally has," he grunted.

Wesson cringed. He told Bumble not to utter a word, but ever since Santa hired him, the tall-blue hairy dude was honest as the pure driven snow.

"Great Wally. Where is he?"

The constable stammered. "He's at the . . ."

"Not again," uttered Santa.

"Uh huh." Wally hopped back up on his stool, slurping his drink through a neon green straw.

Santa patted him on the back. "I respect your honesty, my friend. See you all later." Santa stormed out of the restaurant and headed towards the station.

Another elf leaned in next to Wally. "Santa's gonna turn Rudolph into venison steaks."

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"What's up with that pizza; he shoulda been back here by now," said Smith, his stomach gurgling like an old apartment radiator. The

front door opened. "Ah, what timing! We're back here, constable."

"I am starvin like Marvin," added Rudolph, whose last solid meal was a dozen belly bombers from White Castle the night before.

The heavy footsteps followed the voices. The door leading to the cells creaked as the man pushed it wide open.

"Uh-oh," uttered Rudolph.

"Uh-oh is right," said Santa, who looked almost out of place in his double insulated black jeans and heavy wool black sweater. "What's he done this time?"

"Same as always," replied Chief Smith, "Flying while intoxicated."

"Again?" said Santa, exasperated. Rudolph slumped his head towards the cell floor, his grungy fur oozing shame.

Santa put his hands on his hips and glared at the mangy reindeer. "This makes, what, three times in the last nine months?"

"I believe that's about right," answered Smith, "And then there's the disorderly conduct and late night parties."

Rudolph gave the chief a razor beam glare. He mumbled '*how could you*' under his boozy breath.

"How long has he been here?" asked Santa.

"For a couple of hours now," replied Smith. "Wally just popped over to Bumble's for a couple of pizzas. He'll be back any second."

"Yes, I bumped into him there. I think he was rather reluctant to divulge the whereabouts of a certain red-nosed reindeer."

Moments later, the constable entered the building carrying two piping hot pepperoni pizzas and a liter of Vernors Ginger Ale. He meandered his way towards the cells and placed them on a table.

"Oh that smells good," said Santa, sniffing the aroma. "At least the pizza's decent up here. You folks don't mind if I grab a couple of slices – this diet the Missus has me on is driving me nuts. She's making me eat kale for God's sake!"

"Uh, sure Santa," said Smith, help yourself. Wesson simply nodded.

"Does sleepyhead here want any?" asked Santa.

"The reluctant reindeer shuffled off the bed and looked up shyly. "Hi Santa."

"Can you folks give us a bit of privacy; we've got some things to discuss." Santa handed the constable a twenty dollar bill and snatched one of the pizza boxes. "This may take a while."

Wesson gulped. "Sure, sure," said Smith. "Take your time, Boss. You want any Vernors?"

"Yes please. Best ginger ale around," replied Santa as Wesson handed him a tall blue plastic cup. "You know some say their cheery-faced logo was modeled after me."

"You don't say," replied Smith who unlocked the cell door for the Big Man. Both he and Wesson skedaddled with the other pizza and headed for the front office, closing the door.

Santa pushed the cell door wide open. He stepped in and rolled up his sweater sleeves. Rudolph, still ashamed as a scolded child, lifted

his hangdog face up eyeing the Big Man.

Santa borrowed the chief's chair and placed it two feet away from the reindeer. He sat down, positioning his hands on his thighs and leaned in.

"Now . . . what shall we talk about?"

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A week later, on a chilly third week in December, families gathered at the intimate Bergen County Zoo located in Paramus, New Jersey. A light dusting of snow covered the grounds, mostly of dead leaves and trampled foot prints. Past the bears, bison, and mountain lion was a large fenced-in circular area. A collection of white-tailed deer, elk, reindeer, and a pair of feisty lamas nibbled on their dinner. There was a newcomer, a disheveled reindeer with soaring antlers with a peculiar disjointed nose. It stood in solitary confinement, far away from the other animals.

As dusk settled in and closing time approaching, a young girl leaned up against the split-railed fence, alone. She heard singing, soft yet sad. "Why am I just a misfit, why am I just a nitwit. I was a dear of a reindeer . . ."

The faint voice broke into tears. The lone animal looked down at the ground. Snow flurries started falling. The girl, no more than seven-years-old, called out. "Don't be sad Mr. Reindeer, Santa will find you."

Rudolph turned and slowly ambled over to the young girl. She stretched out her arm and patted the reindeer just above his wounded snout. It was the first time in a long time Rudolph felt a rare

moment of happiness. A glimmer of red emerged from his broke beacon.

The young girl jumped back in amazement. "Are you Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer?"

"Uh huh," the reindeer replied with shy intensity. She was still smarting after finding out a Pegasus wasn't real. But maybe, just maybe, Santa's reindeer were.

"What are you doing at a zoo -- in Paramus? Are you visiting friends?"

"Right now I don't have any friends. Santa kinda banished me here," said Rudolph.

"Why?" she inquired.

"Let's just say I've done some inappropriate things that I'd rather not discuss right at the present moment," replied the reindeer.

"My name's Fiona. You can talk to me; I'm your friend." All the other animals quickly huddled around the fallen icon. "Hey, can we get some privacy here?" shouted the little girl, sporting a yellow winter coat and a red wool hat. The animals amscrayed towards the back of the circled pen out of earshot.

"Fiona, I've let all my deermates down, my family, and most of all, the man who had faith in me to head his sleigh, the Big Man."

"You mean Governor Christie?"

Rudolph broke a half smile. "No, no. I mean Santa. It's what we call him sometimes." The reindeer sniffed then lifted his head. "I need one last chance, just one more opportunity to prove I can be the best reindeer on Santa's team."

"The fact that you acknowledge having a problem is a start in the

right direction," said Fiona. "You can do it, Rudolph, I have faith in you."

Rudolph perked up and nosed the little girl. "Thank you, Fiona. And if I do get back to the North Pole, maybe I can put in a good word for you. What would you like from Santa this year?"

A pet Velociraptor!"

"Uh, I think they're extinct," smiled Rudolph. "How about an autographed stuffed animal reindeer?" She smiled in approval.

A harried voice called out. "Fiona? There you are!" The mom rushed over and gave her daughter a blanketed hug. "I was looking all over for you!"

"I'm okay, I was just talking with Rudolph," said Fiona. "Rudolph, this is Mommy. Mommy, this is Rudolph."

"And how is Rudolph?" Mom asked, "Is he visiting from the North Pole?"

"It's a long story," replied her daughter, holding her mom's hand.

Both the little girl and reindeer winked at each other. Fiona and her mom started walking away. The little girl twirled around and offered up a wave. Rudolph returned the kind gesture by lighting up his nose. Mom turned back, catching a glimpse of his glowing snout. She shook her head, not exactly sure what she'd just witnessed.

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At the Pole, Santa's latest handpicked hire to lead the sleigh team was struggling. Plucked from a nearby temp agency, Herbert the geeked out reindeer, had promising qualities, but irritated the rest of the herd with his oppressive nerdiness.

Instead of a shining honker, the industrious reindeer hooked up a headlamp device just below the base of his sparse-appearing antlers.

Santa was running out of patience. In the brief seven days since Rudolph was exiled, he's already gone through a half dozen applicants.

"Temp agencies," uttered Santa. "Man, I've really hit the bottom of the barrel."

The Big Man was entertaining thoughts of bringing back Rudolph, but the wounds were still too fresh in his mind. He was saddened that things had spiraled out of control just like with Albatross. But Santa was determined to find a stable presence to lead his time. A rock and roll aficionado, he could only think of one of his favorite bands, The Who, when they compromised by selected steady and stable Kenny Jones to replace the manic magic of Keith Moon. They were never the same, reminisced Santa.

With Christmas approaching in a week, Santa finally made the commitment to Herbert. The Big Man remained stubborn as an ox even as the other reindeer begged for Rudolph's return.

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 Back in the Garden State, the wheels were turning in Rudolph's sobered up noggin. He was filled with renewed vigor and spirit, but how to return to the Pole? First off, could he still fly? Thankfully, Santa didn't bust a kneecap or shatter femurs so maybe there was a chance. Second, how the heck would he find his way back? Santa was the true leader on Christmas Eve, not him. Sometime he felt more like a glorified hood ornament

than guiding GPS. Santa on the other hand was a walking, breathing AAA map. He was, as Mrs. Clause joked, "The only man alive who doesn't need to ask for directions -- because he knows exactly where he's going."

Through the next few nights, and with Christmas looming only days away, Rudolph limbered up for the long journey home. When the other animals were sound asleep, Rudolph practiced his jumping and agility. Initially, things were rusty, but Rudolph's persistence was quickly paying off.

After an extraordinarily high jump and soft landing, out of the darkness crept a burly-framed aging mammal. The old timer walked with a slight limp. He sized up Rudolph before speaking.

"You're not from Jersey, are you?"

"Hardly," sassed Rudolph. "And if you say a word to anyone about this I'll personally whack you."

"You could be from Jersey, alright," mused the mammal, nearly a head taller than Rudolph. "So what's with the flying act? You wouldn't happen to be . . ."

Rudolph's nose brightened. "You bet your furry tailed ass I am; the one and only. Now if you don't mind, I need to find my way back to . . ."

"The Pole," he answered in a deep resonating voice. "I know all about the Pole."

"How so?" said Rudolph, who suddenly got chills. He sized up the wily beast from antler to hoof. Maybe it was the darkness but the animal was imposing, big if not bigger than his comrades back home. The antlers rose high like a

towering forest. Despite its age, the mammal had an unyielding presence.

"No way," pondered Rudolph. "Are you THE . . . Albatross?"

"Furry-tailed ass?" answered the reindeer. He stepped closer, now just inches away from Rudolph. Cold breath streamed from his nostrils like car exhaust in wintertime. Rudolph gulped. The great reindeer creaked its' still muscular neck. "Yeah, I'm Albatross."

"I am sooo sorry about what I said; I didn't mean it."

"Zip it Red," barked Albatross. His eyes narrowed. "I know all about you."

Rudolph trembled and stuttered. "You do? How?"

"Whaddya think?" snarked Albatross. "The cartoon, books, t-shirts, and that song; that annoying freaking song – 'had a very shiny nose' for Christ's sake." He gritted his teeth.

"Hey, I didn't write it," replied Rudolph. "I just happen to enjoy doing my job with a bit of flair. I heard you did the same."

"This I can't deny," said Albatross, "But it got me in a world of hurt."

"Me too," drooped Rudolph.

"Which is why you're here . . . in beautiful Paramus, am I right?"

Rudolph ambled over to the fence and gazed up at the charcoal gray sky. Sleet began falling. "Uh huh."

Albatross became irritated, shaking his graying fleece. "God I hate sleet. It's not snow; it's not rain. It's an irritating in between!"

“I hear ya,” conferred Rudolph.

“You know what else I hear?” jabbed Albatross. “Is how much of a screw-up you’ve become. I mean three FWI’s in less than nine months? That breaks my record!”

Rudolph shrugged. “It’s not something I’m very proud of at the moment.” He paused. “Hey, how the hell do you know that?”

“I’ve got my sources,” answered Albatross. “You and I need to have a serious talk, capeesh?”

“What’s a capeesh?”

The seasoned reindeer smiled. “You live in Jersey long enough you start digesting the slang, especially from mobsters. For some reason, mobsters like coming here to the zoo ‘discuss’ things. Crazy”

“What was that thing you did with your antlers, shaking them like that?”

“Mobsters like doing that quotation thing with their fingers, and since I don’t got no fingers, I shake my antlers. Never mind kid, it’s not important, But what’s important is not ending up like me,” warned Albatross. “You got a lot of miles still left on those hooves. My advice: Don’t become a media whore like those Kardashian broads.”

“Who are . . . ?”

“Do me a favor; don’t ask no more questions, just shut your mouth and listen.”

“Alright, alright,” said Rudolph, “I’m hanging onto every word.”

“Remember that little girl you spoke with earlier today? She’s got faith in you. I saw it. She connected with you. So don’t let her down and others like her all over the world. You have a gift my friend. I blew my

chance, but there’s still time for you . . . there’s still time.” Rudolph didn’t know what to say as he watched Albatross strode back towards the darkened corner of the pen, out of sight.

The light from the moon breaking through the charcoal clouds shone directly where Rudolph stood. He glanced up, resting his weary head on the first post of the fence. The sleet began changing over to snow, coming down in quarter-sized flakes. After a moment to collect his thoughts, he started humming a certain tune. “Albatross is right, the Rudolph song is annoying.”

-----  
 Back at the Pole, things were progressively getting worse. Herbert, feeling his oats while on a solo practice flight, slammed into a perched mountain goat stationed on top of a . . . well, a mountain top. The two tumbled downhill, bobsledding into a forest of deep green pine trees. The goat was fine, a bit groggy, but okay. Herbert, on the other hand, suffered major contusions and a shattered fibula. He was finito.

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 The following day, after excessive badgering that bordered on stalking, Fiona was able to convince her mom to return to the Bergen County Zoo. It was near closing. An employee at the ticket office let them in for free. After entering, the little girl made a B-line for the petting zoo. She spotted Rudolph nosing up to one of the white-tailed does. Fiona called him over.

“Sorry doll face, gotta go,” said Rudolph with a wink.

Rudolph trotted over. “Hi Fiona, how are you?”

“Look what I have?” The little girl pulled out a small device from her coat pocket, a much-used Samsung tablet. “You said you needed directions to get back to the North Pole, right?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, I’ve got everything all mapped out for you. Everything you need to find your way home! I even attached a red ribbon so you can put it around your neck. The little girl took both ends and tied them together. “Good luck.” The girl gave the proud reindeer a vice-grip embrace.

“Thank you Fiona,” said Rudolph. “You’ve given me the strength (and now directions) to find my way home; I’ll never forget you.”

“Oh, one last thing,” yelped the little girl.

“Yes?”

“Can I take a selfie with you?”

“Of course,” replied Rudolph, “And I’ll even throw in a shiny red nose!”

Later that evening with only the lampposts providing light, Rudolph jettison from the round pen and headed for the North Pole. “Good luck, kid, good luck,” uttered Albatross, following the red-nosed object like a rising star. He sauntered over to his little corner of the world and cozied down with a pair of vivacious does.

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 Santa was sweating bullets. Twas two nights before Christmas and all was not calm or bright. The Weather Channel was calling for a global Nor’easter. The eight

reindeer were being fixed with headlights, but it wasn't going so hot. After a slew of trial runs, a few things were abundantly clear: The devises were cumbersome; they hindered visibility, and worst of all, they created a serious rash on their necks.

As the sleigh team prepared their final trial run for Christmas Eve, Dancer noticed a trailing light in the sky. "A falling star?" he asked Donner. "Hold on."

Dancer perked up. "It's a bird."

"It's a plane," said Donner.

Vixen chimed in. "No, it's . . . a plane. Damn it."

"That's no plane," boasted Santa, "That's . . . Rudolph!"

The guiding light of Santa's sleigh swooped down, making a perfect landing in the deep snow. "Miss me guys?" boasted Rudolph.

All the reindeer burst into wild cheers. Surrounded by his flying colleges, the red-nosed (and red-faced) reindeer spoke up. "I owe each and every one of you a deep, deep apology. I've been a class-A jerk for too long."

"Amen to that, joked Comet.

'And to Santa, I owe you the biggest apology of all." The Big Man blushed. "No, no, it's true. You gave me the opportunity to lead this amazing group of flying reindeer and I let fame and fortune go right to my head."

"And nose!" barked Dancer. Everyone erupted in laughter.

Rudolph nudged the reindeer with his antlers. "True that, Dancer; true that."

"Well it's good to have you back, Rudolph," said Santa. "We're all

relieved and looking forward to kicking some serious Christmas butt."

Two days later, December 26, the North Pole was in recuperating mode. The stress of the holiday season had been tough on everybody, especially Mr. and Mrs. Claus, who were already planning their vacation itinerary for Key West. The reindeer chilled, and the elves would be gearing up once again for more toy making, although there were rumors that the elves could possibly . . .

The phone rang at the police station. North Pole Police, how may I assist you?" answered Wesson. Both he and the police chief were ready for a tranquil week ahead.

"What?" The constable nearly fell out of his chair. "Where? Are you sure? Okay, okay, we'll be right there."

"Who was that?" asked the chief, returning from the staff kitchen with a donut and coffee.

"It was someone from the Doe Palace."

"The what?" asked the chief.

"The Doe Palace; that house of ill repute; the one in the red-light district," answered Wesson.

"So what's up? Wesson, are you okay

"It's Rudolph . . . he's been found dead in a bathtub apparently of an overdose."

The chief slumped down into his desk chair. He shook his head then pounded his fist on his desk. "Damn."

He looked up at Wesson bleary-eyed. "And only twenty-seventh years old. This is truly the end."



**It came Upon a Midnight Clear  
By DiVitto Kelly**

It was the latter half of December, the twenty-fourth to be exact. Peter and Danielle Anderson, from Cincinnati, Ohio, were enjoying day four of their annual week-long holiday escape to Lone Key, a southwest Florida island oozing of refined charm and jungle landscapes.

After a full day of sunburn and Red Stripes, husband Peter prepped for sleep. He slid open the panoramic bedroom window to savor the acoustics of the Gulf of Mexico waves. It put him to sleep in minutes. Back in Cincy, he rolled and turned like a wind-up toy. Danielle, seven months pregnant, was already asleep, out like a KO'd boxer. Both relished the vastness of the condo's plush king-size bed. At home, the two shared a queen model that was approaching vintage status. In April, it would most likely

partake in their annual spring cleaning yard sale.

After inhaling an after-dinner double scoop hot fudge sundae, Peter thought chasing it down with a midnight snack of chilled shrimp doused in cocktail sauce would be a good idea -- his wife's recent eating habits seemed to be rubbing off on him. Two hours past the witching hour, his gut voiced its disapproval. Anderson got up, relieved himself in the bathroom, before doing a shot of Pepto Bismol.

The thirty-five-year-old opened the sliding the glass door and stepped out onto the lanai wearing a t-shirt and shorts. It felt cool as an opened fridge, with just a hint of tropical humidity. Anderson tweaked his posture, turning side to side like a churning washing machine hoping to induce gastric relief.

Burrrp! "Uh . . . finally," grinned Anderson, bending forward like he'd just completed a long distance marathon.

He was about to step inside when something caught his attention. Anderson turned back, observing the tranquil landscape. No lights; not one single light on. "Power outage," he thought. It'd happened before. The resort's electricity was spotty and about as reliable as Andy Dalton come playoff time. But what really startled the die-hard Bengal fan was the silence. He didn't hear one God-damned sound. You ALWAYS heard the waves no matter how calm the water was. Their condo was no more than a solid 8-iron shot away from the beach.

Anderson stood up and surveyed the grounds, perplexed. "This is too weird." He went back to

the bedroom and thought of waking his wife.

"Not a good idea," he uttered to himself. Danielle was two months away, give or take a week, from delivering a new addition to the Anderson household. Besides, if he did wake her up, she'd probably crave some disgusting concoction like a peanut butter and sardine sandwich. Or maybe an ice cream sundae topped off with a ring of cocktail shrimp.

Anderson slipped on a long sleeved t-shirt, and laced up his neon orange running shoes. He picked up the flashlight set next to the tackle box and headed towards the beach.

As he rounded the condo complex, he gazed up at the night sky. It was black, crystal clear, with every star out in full force. He easily made out four constellations: the big and little dipper, Leo the Lion, and Orion the Hunter. At home in the Buckeye State, he was a sportswriter for the Cincinnati Enquirer and part time astronomy geek. Knowing Christmas was just a day away, he started singing one of his favorite holiday tunes.

"It came upon a midnight clear that glorious song of -- ow!" Anderson, still star-gazing, managed to amble directly into a coconut palm tree. He touched his nose, receiving a mild scrape. There was a spot of blood on his index finger. "More like Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer now," he mused.

Standing a shade under six-feet tall with mid-length blond hair, Anderson scaled the sand dunes, making sure not to trample on the freshly planted sea oats. The beaches always suffered some form

of erosion, plus or minus, throughout the year, especially after severe storms. Years ago, Hurricane Hillary bellowed through, stripping away yards of pristine beach. He and Danielle entertained ideas of selling their timeshare of four years and mosey up the suncoast to Longboat Key. Midwesterners seemed to gravitate to that part of the Sunshine State. The beaches there were snow white and spacious as the grounds at Paul Brown Stadium.

The flashlight crapped out. "Rats," uttered Anderson as he squinted out into the darkness. It was still quiet, not a sound. He could usually count off the number of steps it took before reaching the Gulf. He trekked ahead; still nothing. He bent down, resting on one knee. The sand was moist on his skin. With the help from the glimmering moon, he spotted a handful of dancing shiners and a lone stingray in fluttered panic.

Anderson turned back towards shore. He was far away now. The flashlight bounced back on. He gazed ahead, hoping to spot the white foam from the breaking waves. "Oh shit."

The water had receded, the beach now extending out a hundred yards. Tsunami, he could only assume. He didn't feel any earthquake. That wouldn't matter. It could have occurred hours ago, twenty, fifty, a hundred miles away from his little slice of holiday heaven.

A frequent jogger and tennis player, Anderson sprinted back to the condo, trampling over the sea oats. No time to care. He rushed inside, turned on the bedroom light,

and woke up his wife, clutching her shoulder with his perspiring hands.

“What are you doing? What time is it?” asked Danielle, the words coming out slurred and sleepy.

Despite the short distance, Peter was gasping for air. “We need to leave, now!”

“Why?” asked Danielle, removing her Hello Kitty eye patches from her squinting face.

Peter was knee-deep in fear. “I think we’re going to get hit.” He grabbed only the essentials from the top of their dresser: laptop, wallet, car keys, his wife’s purse and iPad, before jamming them all into his leather backpack. He took in a deep breath.

“Get hit by what?” asked Danielle, sitting up, now appearing nervous as a chihuahua. “What’s wrong? Is it a hurricane?”

“Worse,” answered her husband. “I think we’re gonna get hit by a tsunami. I’ve got your things.”

“A what?” said Danielle. “We’re in south Florida, not . . .” Her voice trailed off. “Did you just say tsunami?”

“I just came from the beach. Only it wasn’t there, I mean the Gulf – it’s like . . . far away! I think something is going to hit us so we need to get to safety.”

The condo building began shaking. “Oh no,” uttered Peter.

The rush of seawater blasted across the barrier island, crashing into the condo building, flooding everything. The sliding glass doors from the ten units below blew out, shattering on impact. There were screams.

Danielle slid out of bed and rushed over to the bedroom window, catching a spray of seawater. “Oh God, the Garcias!”

The water kept coming, methodically. “Get changed, honey,” said Peter. The surge of water engulfed everything natural and man-made. He ran over to the front door and opened it. Cars were already swamped with the steady rise of the Gulf of Mexico’s finest. Smaller compact models shifted out of the parking lot like floating leaves in a stream.

“As long as the water doesn’t rise too much I think we’ll be okay,” said Peter. “

“What about the condo?” replied Danielle. She glanced down at her protruding belly. “Please tell me it’s gonna hold.”

Peter hugged his wife, placing his hands on her shoulders, looking her in the eye. “We’ll be okay.” The two stood in the darkened living room in frozen disbelief. The whole building vibrated for fifteen minutes solid when it abruptly stopped.

Danielle snatched the flashlight just as it rolled off the dining table and waddled back to the lanai. Hey, I think it’s receding! Look, look!”

“Thank God,” said Peter as he headed back to join his wife. “Here, let me see that for a second.” He took the flashlight and shined it over the grounds.

“It’s like everything’s going in reverse,” said Danielle, her left arm wrapped around Peter’s waist. The phone rang. Startled, she stepped back into the living room area and picked it up.

“Who is it?” asked Peter.

She made a ‘hold on’ motion with her hand off trying to listen to the warbled message. “It’s a recording.” She hung up a minute later and turned to her husband. “The bridge to the mainland is damaged and out of commission; the power is out indefinitely.”

“Damn it.” Peter walked into the kitchen and grabbed two bottles of water from the refrigerator, nearly stumbling over the cooler on the floor.

Danielle focused through the mesh screen, spotting a half-dozen drunk people sloshing their way through waist-deep water. “Unbelievable.”

“What’s that?” asked Peter, standing behind her.

“Those people are walking towards the beach. What, are they nuts?”

“Never underestimate the stupidity of vacationers,” said Peter, who quickly recalled a certain midnight hot tub rendezvous involving chilled adult beverages and his premarital wife.

“Probably Steeler fans,” he added with a mild laugh. “I bet they’re just curious to see what’s up with the Gulf. Maybe I should see how other people are faring.”

Danielle gave Peter a bonafide ‘are you crazy’ glare. “What if another wave does come out of nowhere? No way! I don’t want our son growing up without a . . . oops.” The redhead, a children’s librarian and former college soccer player at the University of Dayton, started tearing up.

Peter placed his hands on her shoulders. “Honey, a lot of people may be hurt so I should . . . Hold on, it’s a boy? It’s going to be a

boy?” Peter let out a joyous shriek then broke into the Ickey Shuffle. He embraced his wife then pelted her with smooches.

Danielle suddenly pouted. “It was supposed to be a Christmas morning surprise. I even bought you Pop Tarts; the cinnamon frosted kind.” She broke down in tears. I’m really scared.”

Peter ran his hands through Danielle’s shoulder length hair. “I’m scared too.” He looked down at his watch. “You know, technically speaking, it is Christmas morning so it’s all good. I’m gonna check and make sure the Garcias are okay. Stay here. I’ll be back in a few minutes, I promise. He retrieved the Kelly green battery operated lantern from the lanai and turned it on.

Danielle took a sip of water. “So what do I do while you’re gone?”

“Get cozy and read a book, of course.” He kissed his wife on the forehead before heading out the door. A second later, he reappeared. “Oh, and thanks for the Pop Tarts. Stay safe.”

“That’s my line.”

Peter trudged down stairs and waded into the parking lot, the water coming up just below his calf. Half the cars were either gone or had shifted from their designated parking spot, including their red convertible Mustang rental. He heard a noise coming from the Garcia’s condo. “Adolfo, Beatrice, are you alright?”

Anderson approached the door and surveyed the damage. All three hinges appeared a twisted mess. He spotted water trickling out at the base.

“I’m trying to open it,” called out Adolfo, “but our unit is filled with water.”

“You probably got a few mullet swimming around in there,” joked Peter. “Pull on the door handle and I’ll push.”

“Got it.” The elderly gentleman and class-A fisherman managed to pull the door back a few inches. Peter rammed it open with his full frame. Water gushed out like a broken dam.

Peter gave his favorite fishing partner a hug. “Are you both okay?”

“I’m fine, a little soaked but the missus is shaken up; I think her arm may be broken.”

“Why don’t you two find some dry clothes and head upstairs,” said Peter. “I’m sure Danielle can help. She’s a librarian so she knows everything.”

“Where are you going?” asked Adolfo, watching the young man maneuver through the waterlogged lot.

“Danielle spotted a bunch of knuckleheads going to the beach. I just want to see anyone needs help. I’ll be right back.”

“Be careful, knucklehead!” shouted Adolfo.

Peter flashed a ‘thumbs up’ sign before circling around the two-story building. He assessed the damage. All the lower condos were trashed, suffering the same fate as their neighbor’s unit. There was a dip between the grass area in front of their condo and the sand dunes. In between, the water pooled like a lake. He freestyled towards the partially visible walkway leading to the beach. He slogged up the hill praying to see calm waters.

Peter slipped on the wet sand then stood up. He snagged a discovered flashlight covered in seaweed. He wiped it off before directing the beam towards the water. Everything seemed back to normal.

“Alright, that’s how I like to see Gulf, smooth as glass. Peter glanced up at black ink sky, outlined with infinite stars. Feeling blessed with the good news about having a boy, he broke into his favorite holiday tune again.

“It came upon a midnight clear,

That glorious song of old,

From angels bending near the earth,

To touch their harps of . . .”

Peter abruptly stopped singing when something caught his eye. The soon to be father stepped closer towards the calm surf when he tripped over something rigid. He shined the light and abruptly puked.

There, scattered on the beach were mutilated bodies, all six of them, a pile of ravaged flesh and exposed ribcages.





**Authors!**

**Joseph Conrad (Dec. 3)**

**Philip K. Dick (Dec. 16)**

**Arthur C. Clarke (Dec. 16)**

**Jane Austen (Dec. 16)**

**Rod Serling (Dec. 28)**

**Rudyard Kipling (Dec. 30)**

**The Writer’s Group meetings are held the second Monday of every month in the second floor conference room from 6:00 – 7:30pm.**

**\*Upcoming dates 2015:  
(December 14)**

From picture books to novels, stop by and discuss your ideas. Submit your short story or poem to be published in the monthly Portal to Michael DiVitto Kelly at [mkelly@broward.org](mailto:mkelly@broward.org).

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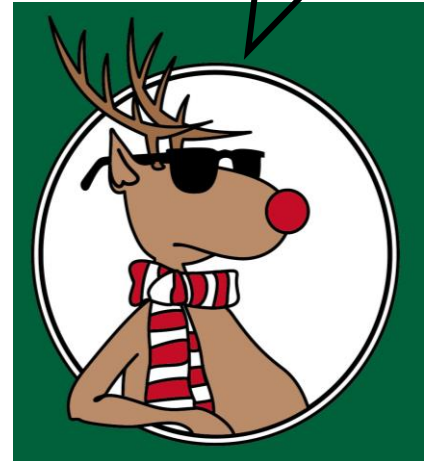
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