

Santa

by

Brian Caroline

Honors Thesis

Advised by

Susan Hauser

April 17, 2001

From the top of the world,
there's only one way to go.

--Truthmonger McGraum

awaking

the castle of the lost elves

Prancer

As elves drink, carouse, and swim, Paul Crooks, Santa's reindeer caretaker, struggles through blizzard winds that bite into his leathery skin. It is hard to see because of the darkness and flying snow. The freezing hurricane hurls him away from his target, the reindeer stable, back toward his bungalow. Eventually, Paul crawls flat on the ground as if he is on an icy covert mission. Paul bumps into something, opens his frosted eyes and sees a lemming crawl out of a snow tunnel. The critter stares at him innocently out of brown eyes and twitches its left shoulder and left whiskers. Paul sneezes and the lemming shakes its head in disgust. Then the lemming snaps into movement. Paul licks a finger and places it onto the lemming's back. They freeze together so that Paul can close his eyes and be led by the lemming. It crawls ahead of Paul, leading him to the reindeer's stable. The lemming never looks back until they reach their goal. Paul stands and thanks the leader lemming with 12 stalks of bluegrass. The fat white rodent wrinkles its whiskers as it chews on a stalk and then bravely continues marching across the storming world. Paul holds onto the railing of the stable's stairs to steady himself against the wind and remains a statue until the lemming disappears into the icy tempest. Then he salutes the unknown soldier, a tear freezes in his left eye, and he grimly pounds to the top of the stairs. Inside the five-story stable, Cupid and Vixen await their waiter. Paul wishes to usurp the reigning deer's kingdoms. He yanks open the door and walks in with a large bag of rations slung over his right shoulder and a flashlight in a holster. Conversation between a human and the animals is created.

"Hey, Cupid, Vixen. How are my deer friends doing today?"

"Paul, it's good to see you," says Cupid. "Have you got our beloved stardust and bluegrass rations?"

"Right here, my friends, right here. Vixen, you look...hot."

Vixen curls up, ready to pounce, and unleashes a barrage of endeared speech. "Oh, fain shalt I look upon thy radiant countenance and lusciously slurp a wet tongue kiss across your rosy Australian nose."

"Mighty yes, Vixen, I agree with your tongue. All right, here is your lunch. Now this stardust here is Dom Perignon champagne laced with the finest salt the world has to offer. Drinking it is like drinking spiced stars. And the bluegrass that you shall soon greedily munch like cow-deer was imported from Kentucky in the United States of America. All right, enjoy, you lovers. I must make the descent."

The reindeer devour their trays of alcohol and grass. After sighing, Paul walks toward a trapdoor on the floor, preparing to drift to a new low. He lifts the trapdoor and slides down a chute, hitting the floor with a bassy thump as the trapdoor above him slams shut. Dasher and Prancer look at him with gaping mouths.

Prancer whines and then addresses the caretaker. "Paul! Why now? We were preparing to rehearse a critical scene in our new play. Now you've ruined the mood."

Dasher spins a useful proverb. "Go down, to sleep, go down, you will rise again."

Paul is puzzled, but he doesn't care to put himself together. Instead, he wishes that care or belief would cease to exist. It doesn't work.

"All right then. Now that that's cleared up, here is your food. Today's stardust is Dom Perignon champagne sprinkled with the world's prime salt, and this is unadulterated bluegrass from Kentucky in the U.S.A."

After throwing the bluegrass and pouring the champagne into the reindeer's trays, Paul glances around the erotically bare confines. Dust for a floor, boring maple for the four walls and the ceiling, a large litter box that he hates to smell or touch, and two munching, sipping reindeer enclose his sight. An electric torch is ensconced on the lower ledge of the window. The torch provides lighting and warmth inside, while its flames are the long winter nights' earthbound stars.

As the two dog-deer slurpily devour their food and drink, Paul looks inside himself and sees something that he doesn't want to see. He turns away and glides toward the trapdoor.

Down the slide he rides. Unfortunately, the large bag trailing behind him escapes his grasp on the way. As he slides into third, the thud of his feet upon the dust is echoed in his head twice. The bottles smack his skull and the trapdoor slams closed. "Uh...ow. This job really sucks sometimes. Sydney, blue skies, shining warm sea and beach girls, that's the life for me."

Paul covers his throbbing skull with one hand while the other makes an elegant arching gesture. He begins at chest-level with his fingers pointed toward the heart, palm down, then smoothly proceeds to trace an arch directly forward until his arm is fully outstretched, palm up, while not forgetting, in the stress of the moment, the obligatory scraping of his stubbly chin with the tips of the three longest fingers. This opens the pathway to royal dears. Still holding the pose, with one hand on his skull, the other outstretched, he leaps into conversation.

"Blitzen and Dancer, my deer friends. How are you doing today?"

Blitzen, a burly reindeer, or an ox in some minds, throws back his beefy neck, with sleek head and thorny antlers attached, and bellows a resounding reply.

"Hella good, my friend. Want to throw some shrimp on the barbie, ocker? Don't crack a corn now, you Australian bastard! Ha ha ha."

Paul half-laughs. His rawhide face betrays the laugh by angrily exploding gold-vermilion. So his left hand moves from the pulsing bump on his head to cover his burning face. Now he trails his fingers down his blazing countenance, removing the hideous red. Consequently, Paul's permanent mask is exposed to the reindeer.

"Ho ho ho, you've still got it, buddy." Paul turns to the other reindeer while laughing merrily. "Hey, Dancer, do you want to hoof it?"

Dancer catches his subtle meaning with one hoof tied behind her back, but she ignores the playful idiom. "Paul...Paul. Oh yes, I am lovely. Every mirror says so. I deserve food and drink and dance, because I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and within *all* reality, people and animals *always* aim to please me."

"Uh...yeah, okay. Dancer and Blitzen, I need to get going. Here is your food. Today's stardust is Dom Perignon champagne laced with premium salt. You'll swear that you're drinking stars and licking salt at the same time. I wonder about something, though. Doesn't having salt in your drink kind of defeat the purpose? I mean, after drinking, aren't you still thirsty?"

Blitzen and Dancer stare questioningly through Paul's unblinking eyes. The reindeer's eyes swirl in circles for a few seconds before Blitzen arrogantly answers Paul: "Shut up."

"Well, here is your Kentucky bluegrass. See you guys later." Now Paul seems to be in a hurry. He nearly trips over the next trapdoor before opening it, slides down, and greets the next couple.

"I say, I do say, before me are two of my dearest, oldest friends. Donder, Comet, how do you do?"

Comet reflects her mind, which also contains a mirror of her husband's. "We do very well, thank you. My nose is seething, my back is freezing. What do you have that will destroy my ailment?"

Paul throws his hands up in silent surrender and shrugs his shoulders in muted puzzlement. "I have brought you stardust. Dom Perignon champagne interspersed with luxurious salt will cure all of your problems. And this bluegrass will keep you happy for hours."

Donder steps forward and briskly halts the conversation. "Paul, that is quite enough. Thank you for stopping by. We will see you later."

Comet looks over at Donder with guilty eyes and he replies by opening his eyes wider and glaring meticulously into her conscience. Paul stares into the first and last of the reindeer's eyes. He is bewildered. All he senses is terse breathing and a flash in his mind.

"Excuse me, Donder, but I was wondering about something I read. By the way, it was in a human-produced book. I read that reindeer do not need to live in stables. Reindeer are highly resistant to exposure. Hell, you can even find your way through snowstorms. So why does Santa keep all of you in a nice stable like this? Of course, I am referring to 'nice' by reindeer standards."

Donder lowers his head and aims his antlers. Behind Donder, Comet follows suit. Paul runs, opens the next trapdoor, and slides to safety. His favorite reindeer, actually, the only reindeer that he even likes, is curled atop hay-covered, lichen-infested ice. There are no torches or windows down here. Only a faint red glow reveals the life on the ground floor.

“Rudolph, my friend, wake up. I am here with your food and drink.”

“Ah, Paul, it’s you. Thank you. Whatever you have brought me will be just fine. Set it down somewhere to my south, please.”

“That’s just about anywhere. No problem, buddy. Say, can we have a little chat? I mean, I don’t want to bother you or anything, but there are some things I really need to get off my heart.”

“Go ahead, Paul, I’m listening.”

Paul begins to crouch down, momentarily hesitates, and then falls to the floor and sits cross-legged. His blonde hair and blue eyes glow red in the enlightened darkness.

“Rudolph, there are many times when I’m not sure just what it is I’m trying to accomplish up here in the North Pole. Do I bow down to the circumstances or do I create my own way of life? I feel like I am in a massive play. Everyone else has been handed their lines and stage directions while I am forced to improvise endlessly. I must pretend to believe and care about things that do not matter to me. Not only that, you and Goldinox are the only ones I can safely talk to. The top of the world is lonely. Of course Santa hears what I say, but he doesn’t care and forgets it immediately. He doesn’t believe I’ll do anything. I’m just the reindeer-tender, after all.

"You know what the scientifically correct elves call Santa's omnipresence, his ability to be everywhere in the world all at once? Sequential Momentary Objective Omniscience. What this means in real people's words is that Santa can see and hear everything that is happening at any one moment. Note that he cannot touch, taste, or smell beyond his body's surroundings. Now, as soon as a certain moment has passed through his huge mind, he remembers only a very few of the most important events which were occurring during that moment. This conversation will be duly noted and just as quickly completely forgotten by the one who knows too much. Now you realize some other conclusions, don't you? He cannot read thoughts, he cannot see in the dark, he cannot hear silence. I'm sorry, I'll put it into plain, positive English. It is possible to render Santa's omnipresence useless.

“Let’s say we were to go into a totally darkened room. Suppose that we are each wearing infrared goggles, allowing us to see in the dark. Couldn’t we plan and plot in this delightful room, in this fashion, without any worries about what Santa might think of our actions? We could write on a board or on paper, without speaking. If we put our minds to it, we could even use sign language or Braille. I guess we’d probably have to get a nose obscurer for you. Just think about it! Santa would be blind to the whole thing. And I know that Santa mistreats you, Rudolph. You suffer at the other reindeer’s expense. They each have a special companion to experience life with, but you are virtually imprisoned down here, alone. I want to help you, Rudolph. But don’t get me wrong. This is also for my own personal gain. My wife actually expanded my mind to this scenario. I do believe the dark room of infrared could work wonders for my life, and yours as well. Well, Rudolph, let me know what you think sometime, eh? I must be going. Don’t worry, Santa won’t know anything about what I just said. I’ve unloaded many sinister things before and no punishment has ever resulted due to my eloquent tirades. He’s got plenty of more important things to remember than a freaky conversation between his lowly reindeer-tender and his fallen sleigh-leader. Perhaps one day, you will *happily* sleigh first!”

Rudolph does not answer. He tips his head downward and nuzzles his nose into the hay. With his face firmly tucked against his sleek coat and the floor, he quickly falls asleep and believes that it was all a dream. Paul lingers for a minute or so, gazing at his stoic friend before taking his exit through the waist-high door on his hands and knees. Outside, he turns on the flashlight and follows its illumination. After noticing that the weather has greatly improved, he abuses the cold air.

“Why can’t Santa get an elevator in there? Those snettlemuckin’ scientists could whip one up in two seconds! The elevator softly stopping at every floor? Me simply stepping out briefly, throwing the deer their food, and then pressing the button to go down to the next floor? No, that would be too easy for that Australian Paul Crooks. Use trapdoors with rusty latches and splintered wooden slides instead. Lucky I didn’t get a sliver today. Goldinox is getting extremely tired of pulling those slivers out from my down-under. So, Paul’s from down under, is he? Then make him act like it.

“Ah, it would curdle my cold blood to start at Rudolph’s room and work my way up. I would get more and more upset as I rose, upholding my facade for those dear deer. At least this way, I end up with some comfort at the end. I can, without shame, unload my mental baggage before Rudolph. He doesn’t mind. Him and me, we’ve actually got a lot in common, I think.”

Outside, snow gusts are fighting Santa Claus's whirring castle. The surrounding solid moat keeps away intruders. It's called the North Pole and the Arctic Ocean. Few attempt to cross it. Those who do rarely reach their destination or their home. Polar bears and imported penguins are lookouts, informing Dr. Claus immediately of any hostile presences. This is possible since Dr. Claus once studied with a doctor who would do little except converse with animals. From him Dr. Claus learned that animals and humans can speak the same language, if given the chance. When potential robbers or destroyers get too close, the sight of one jabberwock will turn the intruders around 180 degrees in the blink of an eye, screams of terror, horror accompanying them for miles.

China Yenrouj screams, running. The satchel hanging down to her stomach pounds in time with her heart. A beam from her miner's helmet searches for escape. Closing her eyes, she keeps running, screaming. Luck. The monster's interest is killed as she reluctantly stumbles into a deep breath walk. She turns around, amazed that her life is blanketed by a glorious cover. The jabberwock is gone. As her burning lungs continue to gasp and wheeze, she spins away from the wavering Northern Lights. A familiar majestic scene slows her breathing.

A massive mansion reproaches the gently blowing snow-wind. Candy canes, 23 feet in slightly curved length, stand near each corner of the naked gray castle. The roof and towers gallantly support immense piles of sleeping snow. After walking around the castle China reaches the outer edge of a walkway where a massive tin mailbox rusts. The address on the mailbox is, "The Clauses, North Pole." China opens the door and spills several hundred envelopes from her satchel into the large vacuum canister inside.

China continues stepping south. A stable filled with reindeer rises as high as the castle. There are five stories within. An orange and yellow glow escaping from the top four stories of windows tinges the North Pole day's natural blackness. Quick flashes of flying silhouettes blaze through the stable's windows.

A quaint bungalow, hooded in darkness, stands nearby as sentry to the stable. In the sun the bungalow's white paint blends in with its ivory Arctic surroundings. Now it takes on the character of the night. China crunches past the stable to the bungalow's magnificent mailbox, which is nearly smothered by piled snow. The eternal night is enlivened by this silver treasure shining silently at noon. China focuses her miner helmet's beam onto the mailbox, opens the mail door and steals two envelopes, but gives nothing. While staring at the Crooks' mailbox, she notes that the North Pole flag is in the upright position. She forces the North Pole flag down. China reflects that the Crooks take pride in their mailbox, while Dr. Claus offers pride in his almsgiving. She walks on in the dark noon, smiling.

Noon. The grueling workday is finally ended. Up in the nearly perpetual darkness of December at the North Pole, it doesn't matter much when one works and when one sleeps. Either way, it will be dark outside. This is yet more true when one's castle does not have windows. Santa has delegated the hours from midnight to noon as the workday for his precious elves. On average, the elves need six hours of sleep to replenish their strength for another 12 hours of time distortion. This leaves about six hours for the elves to do anything their gentle, sharp hearts desire. The kids are free to roam the entertainment chambers and domestic halls

after school or daycare while most of their parents go to the bar near the factory to crack a brew.

The castle is whole, containing everything the elves need to survive and entertain themselves. They have never left it, or even seen the outside. Windows appear to them only in books or when manufactured in the factory, so they are unable to show anything beyond the castle's walls. A favorite location of the elf children is Lake Didgeridoo, an artificial lake in one of the castle's remote chambers, where their bodies collide, binge, and splash. They have all learned that it is dangerous to swim during the first hour after eating, so they drink instead, especially since the fun kids say forbidden drunk swimming is cool.

The word around the underground is that Dr. Claus is not only an ancestor of every elf, he is the father of every elf. It is known that for several centuries he married elf women and also maintained a harem, and all of the subsequent half-human, half-elf children were raised communally with the pure elves. But his current wife is a human from Springfield, Illinois. The elves expect that Santa and Jemima would have kids without pointy ears. Yet Jemima is in her nineties and has never given birth. The elves then, seeing that there are always more elves being born that look like Santa—in effect deflated dwarves with ears that are only half-pointed—have come to the uncertain conclusion that Santa still communes with the female elves, but without their knowledge. Luckily, there have not been any grotesque births, as is often the case in such unclean, taboo situations. So maybe the rumors are false. Nevertheless, it is always fun to speculate. Elves whisper to one another when speaking of their boss and possible father, the man with rounded ears who is capable of time distortion, but how can whispering keep their secrets secret? Dr. Claus is he who hears all and sees all. He does not know what they are thinking

while it is bundled inside, so caution in expressing thoughts is an elf's best defense. Yet it seems that he is tolerant when radical opinions are vocalized, as long as they are not acted upon. Just do not cross this boss.

But in essence the good doctor is a nice, jolly old fellow, as his stomach shakes like laughing gelatin, a glowing heart pulses sentimentally, and a shining red nose lights his way when going to the bathroom or liquor cabinet late at night. The joker is often dressed in an ostentatious red coat and furry ruby leggings, a charcoal black belt with a pine tree golden buckle, and puffy white frills of cotton around the collar, wrists, waist, and ankles. Dark boots with spurs echo down the castle's long halls, their plaintive calls for release customarily ignored. According to the castle's medical specialist, Dr. Zhi, Santa should fight his athlete's foot, but he refuses. He laughs and exclaims that he has discovered the fungal fountain of youth. Often, Dr. Claus will cover his light gray locks with a jovial red stocking cap, ending in a peak which supports a fluffy white cotton ball lazily dancing above. Below his twinkling eyes, the doctor's long, flowing beard is a billowing cloud. Presently, he rests his corn-and fungus-covered feet in his bedroom, in trays filled with champagne, as the workers celebrate their free time.

The elves usually need a few drinks after work. Although they realize, due to their excellent home schooling under Mrs. Claus, that alcohol drains the water out of one's system, they drink liquor and beer in prodigious amounts, knowing that they are only temporarily curing their physical thirst. But maybe their drinking of alcoholic beverages cures a different type of thirst. Mental? Spiritual? Not that the reason matters to the elves right now. Gulp, gulp, gulp, ah.

John McGobber, head of the manufacturing division, bellows loudly in Wiggum's Bar.

Slouching to his left is his favorite clown and laziest worker, Pip Filletdermaus.

"Hey, John, how did we do today? Did you look at the numbers yet?"

"Yeah, Pip, I checked 'em out. We have records that go back about 500 years, and this is the 12th most productive Prancer since the beginning, 1492. So ol' Truck the Revenger didn't have much whipping to do today."

"Really? Wow! I'll drink to that. Here's a toast to all the workers and their families, the boss and his family, Goldinox Crooks and her caretaker, the animals, and everyone else in the entire universe. Cheers."

The glasses clink in a boisterous clangor, spilling alcohol onto the high-grade polished pine surface below. Pip presses his face to the bar and slides his tongue along the intoxicating pond, greedily lapping up every last drop before it evaporates into the ceiling. John's thick eyebrows rise up his forehead and he accidentally spatters some beer from his mug onto the cool stone floor.

"Jeez, Pip, you are quite the drinker."

"I'll drink to that!"

Over in a dark corner of the barroom, where the lights are dimmed for drunk lovers, a stout elf, looking more like a deflated dwarf, loafs with his rotund companion. The two, Candy and Cain, sweep directly to Wiggum's Bar nearly everyday from 12 P.M. to 6 P.M. As they drink, their two youngest children, Babel and Amad, are still in daycare because of its slow clock, while their oldest, Eve, is currently speaking one-on-one with Jemima Claus. Now Candy

and Cain speak with strong Italian accents while their silhouettes make silent caresses in the corner.

“Candy, I know you don’t like it here very much. But just think of all the things Santa has done for us. He provides us with alcohol, education, clothes, food, and steady jobs with benefits. What more can we ask for? If you ask me, this is paradise.”

“But Cain, don’t you see the problem? A pair o’ dice can roll into snake eyes. We both work 12 hours a day, seven days per week, even when it’s not Christmas time. When do we see each other? Only here, in the corner of darkness. What, are we afraid to see the other’s work-wearied eyes? Must we live in denial forever? Our three children know Jemima better than they know us. For heaven’s sake, yesterday I heard Eve calling Jemima *aunt*.”

“Mama mia, my sweet love. What can we do? You know Santa hears us right now. We’re just lucky that he’s lenient with his omnipresence, since he knows that we’re human. Well, we’re elves, but you know what I mean. We can’t be perfect. He won’t accuse us of anything if we’re just talking, but be careful about making any plans for action. I like it here. Actually, I love it here, and I love you. Candy, we do plenty of things together. We live a fermented—perhaps that’s not the right word—life. And I wish you wouldn’t act like work is just a waste of time. There’s a lot of fun and joy during those 12 hours of work. And think of all the happiness we provide for people around the world. At least, for people who celebrate Christmas and have some money. The reason being that if they don’t have money, then they can’t support Santa and his family when he retires. But he may never retire. Anyway, my Candy, what were we talking about?”

"Ugh! My Cain, we *were* talking about us. I never got into all of those reasons for Christmas and why we do what we do and where we came from. You are the master of that in this family, you scholar you. I kind of feel like I both want to be and want not to be. Oh honey, I just want to be happy, with you."

From the other side of the bar, a resounding answer is plainly heard.

"I'll drink to that!"

* * *

The young elves who aren't yet old enough to attend the castle school, which lasts for the same 12 hours as the workday, are cared for by a few adult elves at the daycare service directed by Yolanda Urdu. For now she and the other workers usually communicate with the toddlers through signs. But they also throw in dashes of English since this has been the official language of the North Pole since 1623.

Yolanda, like every current Claus worker, was taught by Jemima. Jemima has been teaching during her entire 61 years in the castle. All that is known about her is that she keeps many secrets. She is old and wrinkled on the outside, but never makes a mistake or loses her train of thought. Everyone says her wits are sharper than an elf's piercing ear. And Yolanda knows this well. Jemima will someday instruct these toddlers in every conceivable subject, from under-ice basket weaving to the English language to history to physics to bowling—revised according to what she believes the elves should know.

Right now, according to the daycare's slow clock, it is three minutes to noon, and the small, pudgy elves are content simply to be in the throes of toddlerhood. They unceasingly run,

skip, jump, sing, yell, scream, pull hair, cry, whine, play, learn, build, destroy, sleep and dream, only to go through the entire process again and again. Yolanda always wonders at their resiliency, how they keep going, and going, and going. They are just like those energetic electrical bunnies they will all someday help to build for good little boys and girls.

For the care providers, the daycare is loud. It is dull since nothing special is happening. Yolanda looks at multiple reflections of her face in her red fingernails. The other daycare workers are reading books either revised or written by Jemima. One is *The Bible* in English, two are *The Complete Elf's Guide to Being Cool*. The children are everywhere from run to destroy. Reflections are suddenly ignored as Yolanda feels a cold chill from her nape to the bottom of her spine, and...

Babel Rocco punches his brother, Amad, in the nose. The blood gushes, tears flow, his face violently rocks in his hands.

Yolanda runs toward the boxer. "Babel, what are you doing? Why did you hit your brother like that?"

Yolanda casts the towering Urdu shadow. Babel looks up innocently and does not answer. He raises his arm and twists his wrist as if he is reading an invisible watch. She exclaims at him with a stern look. Her penetrating eyes accuse him, they accost him. Babel's neutral lips morph into a wicked grin. The mocking star, his eyes twinkle. Yolanda throws back her head. Her dead, black hair, accentuated by dyed red streaks, bounces, waves, and returns to its place. She laughs disdainfully at the coy criminal. "So, you think you're going to throw your

weight around here? You're going to call the shots? I'm sorry, mean li'l munchkin, but I'm running the play. You're going to solitary confinement."

Babel's sinister smile turns into a frown. He sticks out his pointy tongue. Yolanda retorts by grabbing his arm and carelessly dragging him behind her to a solitary confinement cell.

Yolanda leaves Babel in his personal prison and then washes away Amad's bloody fountain. The solitary confinement room is rarely used for anyone besides Babel. He seems to relish the loneliness of thought. Babel thinks to himself that he wants to be a grownup, like his parents at the bar, since that means he will finally be in control.

Seven minutes before the brotherly punch, Babel and Amad's older sister Eve drifts off into daydreams while Jemima Claus continues on with today's closing lesson.

"...and one of the other ways in which elves are superior to humans is in the perception of time. You are able to live in a faster reality than humans. When elves work, they don't waste time. They create more of it, they stretch it. After all, time is only an invention. It doesn't exist naturally in the way that either elves or humans use it. Whereas humans will experience one second in their time as a short moment, you elves can make that second seem like an hour or more. But it doesn't seem like you're moving and thinking at a blazing rate of speed. No, it's all in the mind. Through a sort of meditation or hypnosis, elves are able to live in another reality. It seems that this type of so-called time distortion is only effective for 12 hours. After that, its disadvantages begin to outweigh its benefits. Fatigue and extreme headaches will result if time

distortion is experienced continuously for more than 12 hours. And that is why we have a 12-hour workday!

“Now, you precious little elves may be wondering why you can’t experience time distortion right now. It is because you must grow into it. It’s sort of like what humans call self-actualization. You must realize who you truly are and what you are capable of. You must meet many lower requirements before you are capable of transferring your mind into a different phase of reality. And then you can have a time distortion festival in your honor!” Jemima looks upward and pretends to be figuring something out, paces back and forth with her eyes on the reflections covering the clean pine floor, and then faces the elf children.

“Have you ever wondered why elves of different ages and skill levels are taught the exact same material at the same time in the same room? This is yet another way in which elves are superior to humans. Humans tend to learn in terms of progressive difficulty as they get older, so they are separated by age. But you are unified despite age. Elves learn everything at all times! You hear the same subjects over and over again. As you get older, you just wade into the deeper water that you always knew was there waiting for you. While education is separated into categories for ease of human consumption, elves integrate everything into one coherent world-picture. Finally, after about 16 years of living and learning, elves tend to spontaneously experience time distortion. In one instant, elf children become elf adults. You may not be any taller, and not much wiser than before, but you will definitely be more efficient! Are there any questions on this lesson?”

Eve raises her hand timidly. Jemima slaps her wrinkled right hand to her forehead. She knows that Eve will offer wit candy-coated with stupidity.

"Yes, Eve. What is your question, dear?"

"Jemima, what did you say about elves and humans?"

"Oh, poor Eve. You've got to listen or you'll never experience time distortion. You don't want to be a child your whole life, do you?"

"No. Well, no. Maybe. Yes? I don't know. What was the question?"

"Eve Rocco, let's have a talk after class, OK? Children, it's time for lunch. I'll see you all tomorrow." Jemima softens her voice and prepares to have yet another after-class discussion with inattentive Eve.

"Eve, what do I have to do to get you to listen?"

"Well, um, you could talk in slow-motion."

"What are you talking about? How is your home life?"

"My home life? I guess the home is living pretty good."

"Ugh! *Zut!* I mean, how is your family life?"

"As a collective, my family is in shambles. We live in constant mutual anxiety. We are all afraid of some unknown terror when we're around each other. In order to relieve ourselves of the difficulty of fighting an undefinable terror, we create a fear of our other family members that we can attack. You see, when there is an object of our anxiety, our anxiety then becomes fear. We can attack fear. In my family's case, we overcome fear by wailing in anger and pounding our fellow family members into bitter pieces. But as for me, I love to hate."

"Eve, I'll admit that you do have a very active imagination, but you need to start learning your lessons. I can tell that you are a bright young child. Don't waste your mind on myths about your family. You can talk circles around me, but I'm only trying to help you. Just listen and learn. Please, for me. You may be the greatest time dilator of all time!"

"Don't you see that that's the problem? I'm not an elf. Never mind. Jemima, my mama-- just kidding--I appreciate your concern. Good luck."

"Ugh. *Zut!*"

Meanwhile, in the throne room, a skinny, anxious, red-faced guard looks up past Santa's belly and beard to his face. The guard's sharp news has popped Santa's ears. Santa breathes in deep so his stomach presses into the guard's chin until he continues his deflating interrogation. Whenever Santa speaks without pausing, his stomach slowly moves inward, becoming a mild hill, and then new breath once again bulges into his lungs, restoring his majestic airy mountain.

"Xebo, are you serious? The jabberwock got out? I can't understand why my omnipresence didn't catch that. I wish I was in control of it, but it seems to have developed a mind of its own lately. Well, Xebo, you say that Zoot is back in his room?"

"Yes, Dr. Claus, he is once again in captivity."

"Captivity? Why must you phrase it so harshly? Zoot is back where he wants to be, where we take care of him. All he has to do is hunt down would-be assassins and thieves. Otherwise, he simply rests in his throne room and growls for food, drink, and royal pleasures. Oh yes, I hope he didn't hurt the letter carrier. China is a very good person."

"Yes, Santa, she is."

"What did you say?"

"I said, 'Yes, she is.' "

"And?"

"And what, Sir? Oh, I am so sorry, *Dr. Claus*. It won't happen again."

"Excellent."

The regal mountain is restored.

* * *

The darkness so often surrounds Babel that his eyes are usually massively dilated. To his dismay, Daycare Services does not allow sunglasses. Otherwise, he wears them to protect himself from the light whenever possible. Yolanda thinks that she is punishing Babel when she takes him away from the daycare activities and gives him to the darkness. But, in his mind, separation is a reward for violence and unacceptable social behavior. He can think, plot, and dream an escape from the authority that he despises. Babel always did think unity was boring anyway.

His spindly black hair, sharp nose, scheming mouth and pale white skin are paroled when the daycare's lagging clock finally passes twelve. Only two minutes after being imprisoned, he is admonished—all the same old stuff worthy of being forgotten—and thrown back into the world of events. He darts out of the daycare center and makes his way to the family apartment, Grotto 31.

Babel bumps into drunk elves under the torches and dim fluorescent lights that span the halls. The lighting in the castle is at barroom levels, hardly light enough for intoxicated elves to

see their way through spinning, multiple-imaged halls. They often knock Babel over because of their wicked stumbling. Now he tastes the floor and is unfeelingly trampled upon. Suddenly the thought flashes into his mind that, during his entire life, he has never looked through a window, mainly because there are no windows looking out from the castle. The thought is repressed. He gets up and struggles on, finally making it to the domestic chambers after many falls and tramlings, bruised black-and-blue and feeling burnt by the intensity of his dreams, as if he has lifted a curtain and gazed through a window into blinding heaven. But the future passes before his eyes and the curtain falls.

As Babel opens the thirty-first door, he smells beer crawling through his nostrils. Like a snake, he tastes the smell of alcohol rolling on his tongue, and it makes him hungry for pickled eggs. The family cave is a perfume of alcohol, combined with a pervading dustiness that strangely suggests dignity. Rusted katanas catch his eyes. The family's weeping capuchin monkey, Babsy, peers out of its cage, praying with its eyes for liberation. Babel scratches his own left pupil, which causes a small and painless gash, while he decides that now is the time to pen the wicked deed that has been coiled inside his mind for most of his life. It will unfold dreamily, assaulting the universe with its epileptic wake.

"I with the blackness. Me, free. Free from the world. Alone, I can be me." Babel notices a tattered sheet of yellow paper sitting on the kitchen table. "What is this? A note from dear old mom."

Babel grabs the note and reads aloud to Babsy.

“ ‘Dear Eve, Babel, Amad, Your father and I are at Wiggum’s. We’ll be back later, and with all hope, we will be drunk. Sincere me, Candy mama.’ ”

Babel surrounds paper with hand, multi-crumples, and carelessly throws it over his shoulder onto the dusty floor.

“Enough of these interruptions. No more games. It’s time to claim my fame.”

Babel bounces through the kitchen, on top of the counters and the pentagon table, and curves a right into the kids’ hallway. Skipping, humming, he grinds to a stop and then magnificently strides down the bleak gray corridor. As he nears his room, his excitement can no longer be contained. He dashes into his brightly lit room.

“It hurts, it hurts. Ah, there I go. Can’t believe I forgot to wear my sunglasses. I see that you have been waiting for me, evil pen. Together we shall renounce reality. Pale, pale paper, our pallid deed will rip hearts apart. Here it goes. With the help of Santa’s dependable letter carrier, we will transform the earth.”

As Babel finishes writing a three-line message, Santa’s omnipresence, his mind’s eye, alerts his eyes’ mind. Zooming in from far away, from many directions, it centers on Babel, the overreaching schemer. Santa uncharacteristically does note this episode.

Unaware of the impending danger, Babel can do nothing but laugh in the polarized light.

“Ha, ha, ha. Hyarha, hyarha, hyarh--”

“Babel, what are you laughing about?”

“Oh, hello, Eve. How are you doing? I was just thinking about a funny thing that Monica did. She was—mind never. How was school, sister?”

"The same as always. Jemima tried to brainwash me, but I always keep my thinking thirsty. Then, it was really funny, too, I played the drowning idiot, and she plunged right in. Works every time."

"Excellent. Well, I have work to do, but thanks for stopping by."

"Shut up, you babble."

"Speak of holy days, Christmas Eve."

"I'm named for enchanting evenings, you're named for idiocy."

"You got me," says Babel. "I don't understand what you're saying. I must be dumb."

"Good. Shut up."

* * *

The kids line the shimmering lake, engulfing it, drowning it with their elfin exuberance. Once robust cans and bottles of alcoholic beverages line the beach in lieu of seashells and sand castles. There are no lifeguards here. No authority. Just kids. Kids with ethyl alcohol. And swimming.

Thirteen of the young elves are joined in a slightly harmonic chorus. They are a young gang known as the Dirty Baker's Dozen. Their sweet voices ring and echo off the cave walls, the lake surface, and the fluorescent lights overhead.

"Migmulaka and Monica, burning family trees, swimming in the sea, d-r-i-n-k-i-n-g. First love comes, second comes slave-i-age. The end—a dividing force, it's sickening, scary. Hyarha!"

Migmulaka loves comedy. He is its slave, but the teasing still scars him. After wrinkling himself with thought, he unfurls a deep breath.

“Quit laughing, you imbecilic hyenas. I don’t even like Monica. I don’t want her unclean soul anywhere near me. When you sing that song, you’re just expressing your own secret yearnings. You all want Monica. That’s why you talk about her all the time. You obsess over her, you mack baddies. I treat her like elves are taught to treat those who do not partake of the divine wine of education. When I am with her, I only make fun of her sewer smarts. She lives in an old sewer grotto, you know.” A member of the Dirty Baker’s Dozen interrupts and says, “So do you!” Migmulaka ignores the remark and continues.

“Your collective fetish is disgusting. Get out of my sight, you ‘Dirty Baker’s Dozen’, lowly goats, curs of impudence, insidious two-faced pretenders. Hyarha!”

The gang members are stunned. They don’t know what to say. They’re just kids. They only understood about half of what Migmulaka said. Except for their leader, Chalucka. He looks around at his fellow gang members, reassuring them with his upturned nose and smug smile that all is well.

“Migmulaka, you sad, puny excuse for an elf, you have no idea what you’re talking about. Your reasoning is nonsensical. It’s all nonsense. Just because we tease you, we are obsessed with Monica? That is piggy-chopped logic, my stupid friend. Go back home—oh, yes, you don’t really have a home, do you?—yes, go back home and cry yourself to sleep in your hammock at *Monica’s* sewer grotto. Bastard!”

“No, no, Chalucka,” replies Mig, “you do not know the meaning of home. You are more than the definition of evil, you are its earthly reflection. Demons would run away from you, screaming in terror, never slowing down to glance back. You, like Monica, ‘the one without

pointy ears', will never really know life. You will stumble through it, looking for happiness. You will never think, you will keep drunkenly staggering until you find that it's too late to change the past. Then you will die, unfulfilled and reviled by all who have unluckily met you during your brief sojourn on this planet. Your soul will be homeless, without a grave. You shall wander with demons in a dead parade to nowhere, making a mockery of yourself by pretending that you still live. Ambling to a better nowhere is utopia for the homeless. I hope you enjoy this fleeting house, the world, while it lasts. For your putrid house, your body, shall find its last soon. Fie, die, die, because you cannot live."

"Hyarha! Hyarha! Fark. Once again, Migmulaka, dumbass extraordinaire, your reasoning does not make sense. It may sound good, but it makes for an extremely thin argument. You try to dazzle us with your vocabulary, because that's all you have. It's like someone who speaks both Arabic and English arguing with someone who knows only Arabic. The former argues in English, and then acts like the latter is an idiot for not understanding it. Truly an inane way of getting through life. Excuse me, truly a stupid way of living. Get your pretentious dictionary mind out of here. You know a lot of words, but you understand their meanings no more than the average computer. Hyarha!"

This is more than Migmulaka can bear right now. All of the comedy in life has been vacuumed out of his laughing heart. All that remains is tragic seriousness, dreams of day without night, no hope. He goes away to forgive himself for his lies.

The children who witnessed this spectacle have remained motionless ever since the debate exploded. Unblinking eyes, mouths lightly open in wonder, and slackened arms at their

sides gradually return to life. Heavy words were exchanged. Someday they may understand, but not now. Monica is among the gapers. She is used to being teased. She wouldn't have compressed under the pressure like he did.

Soon jokes are made at Migmulaka's expense and Monica dives into the lake and immerses her body underwater for an entire minute. She rises wet and haughtily exits the dazed beach. Everyone watches her leave in tense anticipation, and as the corridor door slams, the hyarhas erupt. "Hyarha, hyarha, hyarha!"

The Dirty Baker's Dozen begins a group discussion.

"Now they'll lie to each other in their hammocks."

"Yeah, I guess that's how it works in the old sewer district."

"Monica's round ears would be fun to caress," says Rex.

Rex's girlfriend, "Sad" Ida Urdu screams, "What?"

"Just kidding," Rex answers.

"All right then. Wait. Your words would lie comfortably on a hammock, wouldn't they?"

"I'm not that smart. I can't predict the future."

"No. You king of liars."

* * *

Xebo, Santa's Imperial Guard, approaches the thirty-first door in the hall of the elves' dens and boldly opens it without knocking beforehand. "Ahem, Babel Bartholomew Rocco, you are summoned to Dr. Claus' colloquium room."

Eve is the first to reply.

"What is the meaning of this imposition?"

"That is not for me to answer. Dr. Claus will reveal the reason. Now get your brother for me. I will escort him to the good doctor and then I will bring him back safe."

"Ah! No fair. I don't like this. Babel, get in here. You're supposed to go see Santa."

"Dr. Claus," says Xebo.

Babel bursts forth, jumps on the table, hits his head against the overhanging chandelier, recoils in a 180-degree arc and slides off the table onto the floor as if he is a melting clock. A new cut throws red on his forehead, but he does not notice. He hops to the guard, bouncing as if he is a kangaroo and the floor a trampoline, eager to talk with Claus informally.

Xebo stamps his regal purple boot in time with Babel's rising, falling shadow. "Hey, Babel, it's not springtime yet."

"Whatever. Let's go, Xebo."

Xebo places his weapon, a laser light pen, back into his royal turtleneck pocket. Then Xebo and Babel stride, silent, past number 30, number 27, number 15, number 3, number 1. Eve follows down to number 13, then she feels a gnawing desire to go home to pet the Roccas' 12th monkey, Bussy. The previous 11 died of bananadine poisoning. Xebo and Babel continue walking in silence, while Babel thinks dividing thoughts that are nearly beyond his childish words. The only words he can translate from his feelings are, "There are gaps in our lives. Windows are covered by heavy curtains. The sun is hiding from us."

Xebo and Babel now spiral up wide, short, close stairs. Their feet do the talking.

Fluorescent white lights overhead seem to be partitions of a pale sun. Even here, above the domestic chambers, the walls petrify the thoughts of elves who dream of seeing what's on the other side. Babel thinks, "Mighty yes, this is a rocky prison." Finally, the quiet two wind up at the next floor, where Santa calmly waits. Xebo hesitates until a slight dizziness in his head subsides, then addresses the master.

"Dr. Claus, here is Babel Bartholomew Rocco, as you requested. I will put in my earplugs now and turn around. Okay, you may safely proceed."

"Xebo, there is no need." Santa turns to Babel and says, "He doesn't hear me. Oh well. Babel, how are you doing today?"

"I'm doing great, Santa. Tell me, why did you call upon me?"

"Babel, you know why. You shouldn't be writing messages like that. They can hurt Santa and, eventually, they will hurt you, too."

"How?"

"Because, Babel, if people think that I'm dead, they will no longer care about Christmas. They will unwholly move on with their life, blind, forgetting about the one time during the year when they would try their hardest to present gifts to their loved ones, and even to their hated threes. Sometimes goodness must be whipped into action. And, Babel, without popular support, I would no longer be able to support your family or any of the other elves. We would all be forced to leave this joyous mansion and go into the difficult human world. It is highly unorganized and damaging to happiness. I don't think we could make it. The leprechauns,

gnomes, nymphs, Sidhe, and other gentle small folk of old have all died out in the modern world of human domination. Even wild elves, your primitive ancestors, are gone, crushed upon the face of the earth. Truth, when crushed, may rise again, but I don't think wild elves were very close to gentle, domesticated truth." Santa breathes in deeply, then continues, his eyes staring deep into Babel's, seeming to devour his thoughts.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to punish you, Babel. As much as I can recall, you are punished quite often by Yolanda. So, just keep this in mind: recognize painful consequences before you deserve them. If you do, then you won't commit those bad actions. I'm no slave driver, you know. You all have your freedom within these walls. Use it to its fullest. I have no problem with you dreaming of perfection, but please don't expect me to provide it. Now go back to your home and keep being the good, inquisitive little boy that you are. Don't do it again. I'll get Xebo to escort you back.

"Xebo! Xebo! Sassafras, why must he insist on putting in earplugs? I never asked him to do that. Well," the red-nosed old man muses, "let's see if he makes sure to call me Dr. Claus."

Santa sneaks up behind Xebo and taps him on the shoulder. He screams, jumps, and whirls around in the air. Face to belly with Santa, he looks up, smiles, and removes his waxy earplugs.

"Ahem, boss, ready for action."

"Xebo, please take Babel back to his room."

"Yes, Dr. Claus. Hey, Babel, I'm escorting you to your house. Let's go."

They walk through the cool drafts of the castle, their conversation once again their footsteps upon the stones below. Upon reaching number 31, Xebo inquires as to the content of Babel's conversation with Santa.

"Santa said that I should not write any more destructive messages."

"What did you write?"

"I wrote, 'Santa is dead'. That's it. I was going to send it to all of the major newspapers. I know someone who can get mail out of here and to its destination."

"China."

"Nope, it ain't going there."

"Babel, it sounds to me like you're a troublemaker. Santa is getting much too soft-hearted these days. I hope his omnipresence doesn't catch this. Babel, you're going to solitary confinement."

"Oh no, not that!"

"Yes, Babel, I have determined your fate. And I will keep you there a long time."

abduction

Eve is home alone, petting Bussy through his cage's bars, wondering where Amad is since it is his bed time. She is distracted and takes her touch from Bussy as her parents stumble into the door. They whisper back and forth and figure out how to open it. Finally they make it into their putrid, dirty, dignified house, draping over each other like laughing tablecloths. Eve points out the missing Babel scenario, which snaps her parents to immediate drunken seriousness.

"Eve," says Candy, "when did you last see Babel? We must find him. He's never been gone for this long."

"Like I said, Mom, he went to see Santa. Xebo took him there, and he was supposed to bring him back home, too. When I noticed that Babel had been gone for way too long, I went and asked Santa about it. Santa says that Xebo left the meeting room with Babel, but he can't seem to focus in on what happened afterwards. He has searched his omnipresence, but it refuses to spotlight Babel. We're on our own, for now. But it's pretty obvious. Xebo did something bad to Babel."

"Right," says Cain. He points a bouncing finger toward his wife and daughter. "Candy, Eve, let's find out what that twisted snettlemucker did. Even though he is highly respected and feared, for some *invisible* reason, fark him and his pathetic life."

"Cain honey, please control your language."

"Hey, I'm a burly Rocco. Cain is my name, I can do anything. Let's get 'im."

The family gathers into a love triangle and each member puts a hand in the middle of the triform. They lock their fingers together and drop their hands down an inch. As the hands in the center of the triangle rise, their cheer flies: "Whoa, Roccas!" They smile, laugh, and prepare for stern business. Both Candy and Cain suddenly receive a vague sense of something missing, and unify their voices with one question. "Eve, where is Amad?"

"He can't help us anyway. Let's go."

Amad skips home at 6:09 P.M. Finding no one else home after six o'clock is unnatural. There is usually at least a passed-out parent lying around somewhere.

"Mom, Dad," Amad calls, "where are you? Hello, is anybody home? Bussy, where is everybody? What should I do? Maybe something happened to them. I'll talk to you, Bussy. Nothing bad will happen if we just sit here and talk."

Amad finds a cluster of bananas in the kitchen, detaches one, and then plows a chair through the dusty floor while music plays in a neighboring den, sad and uplifting. He sits *mano a mano* with Bussy, starts talking, and offers the weeping capuchin the banana through the bars of his cage. Bussy's entire face glimmers. His face understands. A monkey with a mind, and large ears to listen. Bussy slowly reaches out and snatches the food. He peels, eats, and meditates. When Amad searches for understanding on the monkey's face, Bussy tilts his head to one side, softly closes his eyelids, then opens his eyes again, glistening and ready for more dampening words.

The fruit causes Bubsy to remember a segment of a poem he composed shortly after his capture near the Amazon. "Appease the human, tricks and trifles lead to treats. Monkey ears can understand when they listen, other times they wiggle as if on a flying mission."

Five banana peels later, Amad's eyelids stare at the floor. Bubsy stares at his fat stomach and contemplates.

"Satisfying domesticated animals is strange. Survival is not the problem. They are sustained for doing menial work, such as being an eye-pleasing arrangement of fur, or a strong-backed beast, or a lazy whirring motor, or a capsule of joy and unconditional devotion, or exotic, or ultimately weird. These great warriors, in order to deal with being prisoners of space, should avoid being prisoners of mind. If one can't physically escape, deep thought is the best available weapon against suffering and imprisonment. It may be the cure. Although action before thought might also work, this monkey doesn't recommend it. Distorting reality through thoughts rather than actions, as Don Quixote was known to do, is sometimes essential to cause the world to conform to one's dreams. When distortion of the world is not possible physically, then it must be realized mentally. Like intoxication, love is a distortion, a thrilling poison in the brain. Poison, when used correctly, can be a cure that extends life. Without dreams I would die in a cage.

"Amad's instinct is to think. That is now my instinct, too. This instinct can lead to our freedom. When we fly with thought, we can know escape, whether caged or uncaged.

"Ah, too much. No more contemplation. Now, meditation." Bussy seems to sleep. A broad grin lifts the outer edges of his cheeks. Then his mouth goes straight, and content, and one can almost imagine his dreams of jumping in the jungle.

* * *

A room decorated with 12 miniature Christmas trees and 84 ropes of light winks in the night. On the outside of the Clauses' bedroom door, "Do Not Disturb" is cradled in the circular arm of a verdant wreath. Thin, opaque white curtains create the sides of this bed fit for a dreaming queen. A psychedelic canopy, literally an overgrown Grateful Dead t-shirt, encloses the majestic king-size bed below. Above the multicolored canopy, a lone parasitic mistletoe levitates. A white berry falls from the mistletoe onto the canopy, creates a small depression, bounces modestly into the air, and then snuggles down into its new holy home.

Jemima snores softly. Her hair, usually worn in a bun, is now released from captivity. Gray and black hair fans out like the lengthy train of a slowly striding bride's wedding gown. But this bride is crushed beneath a heavy mind. So she turns onto her left side, pulling the red and green covers off her sleeping partner and, due to the bells placed neatly on top of the custom blanket, a tender chiming catches the warm air. The hair is now both free and capable of movement. Yet it still lies there, draping onto her plush red pillow, facing her husband, while she lightly breathes sleep.

Santa is not cold. Blankets are simply tradition. His jolly warm red suit suits him just fine. He snores even louder, basking in the newfound freedom that his nighttime uncovering allows. His slowly heaving stomach rises and falls, rises and falls, a large rippling wave that has

been traveling for nearly 1700 years. His eyes dash back and forth, around in circles, in rapid diagonal turnarounds and complex patterns of sleepy surrender. His mind's eyes and ears blanket the world while he snores the night away.

Vixen

Today is Vixen, the eighth day of Christmas according to the North Pole calendar. The sun still hides, fearful of the Arctic winter's law. The elves are busy in their singsong rhythm of work and sustaining carols while Jemima teaches, Paul Crooks takes care of nothing, and Santa continues to be.

Pip is slacking in the factory, as usual. He gets the attention of John McGobber, the manager of the Manufacturing Department, and displays some antics for him.

"Hey, John," he says, "have you ever heard the one about, 'Walla, doogies?' "

"No, Pip, I haven't. But please, get back to work. The other elves are getting mad."

"But John, I can't keep up that time distortion. It hurts my gentle brain. Don't I work much better as your jester? Don't I keep you entertained between whippings?"

"Pip, don't be a bastard. Almost every night before I go to sleep, I turn to my wife and ask her for reassurance that it's all right to whip elves who mess up, even if they're working hard. She won't give me the approval I seek. So we turn away from each other and go to sleep. That's why I don't quite understand how she got pregnant."

"Hey, it wasn't me, boss."

"No, I wasn't accusing you, Pip. But," he whispers, "maybe those rumors about Santa are true." Then John raises his voice and continues loudly. "Do you think I enjoy supervising Truck the Revenger when he is forced to whip the elves for doing substandard work?"

"I don't think you have to force him, sir. He enjoys it."

Truck hears strains of this conversation despite the rapid whirring of the industrious elves. He comes over to the two and asks, as if he is a deaf musician, "What's that?"

Pip says, "That, Truck, is a lot of elves over there behind you. What if they all messed up at once? Do you think you'd have the strength to whip them all?"

"What kind of damned question is that, Pip? Of course. You know I'm good."

Pip winks and says, "Allaw ydoog."

"What?"

"Allaw ydoog. Write it down. Look at it in a mirror. You'll see what I mean. The reflection of good is evil."

"Pip, if you weren't so smart and stupid at the same time, I'd whip you for confusing me by mistake and on purpose."

"You don't make sense, Truck."

Truck is getting angry now. His hand shakes, veins bust out on his forehead and temples, and he seems to be trying not to take the cat-o'-nine-tails out of its holster.

John intervenes. "Truck, Pip is doing a good job, so you can't whip him. He's keeping us away from boredom. Watch and admire the other elves, appreciate their material contributions to the idea of Christmas. So go ahead, get back to your post. Remember now, I'm searching for a nice lady for you. Take it easy and I just might find one."

Truck, with reluctance, accepts the offer. This may be the last hour of work for a couple of days, so he is looking forward to some whipping to keep in practice. But the long, fast day

ends without a wound. The elves quit warping from place to place and walk out of the factory, past the cafeteria, which is used only during the five-minute break each workday, across the hall, and into the bar. Any heat and sweat left over from work quickly disappears. Once the elves cool down, they put on their drinking coats. This is the adult elves' home, after work each day, until they want to sleep somewhere other than on the floor, passed out and trampled upon. The bar is a good home to have. Since the castle is freezing, it is quite convenient to drink liquid alcohol rather than solid water.

John McGobber drinks and converses with the other two managers of Santa's industrial juggernaut. During work, John is the only one with time to be entertained. Monk, the guide of Quality Control, and Gilberto, who manages Wrapping and Transport, stay busy, especially because they are surveying elves that distort time. The day goes by in a fatiguing flash for Monk and Gilberto, which is exactly how the laboring elves feel. Nevertheless, it is easier for the managers to recover from their fatigue. Since only their brains are going fast, trying to keep up with the actions of the warping elves, their muscles do not ache at the end of the workday. At noon, the only ache they have to take care of is in the skull. Luckily, that ache is easily subdued by calm drinking and conversation.

John holds a conch shell at this time, and it is filled with a little water. After two hours at the bar, he is still in control of the conversation. Pip's nose already smells the cool, dirty floor, and his arms and legs have been arranged by chaos. Someone has drawn a chalk outline of his lying profile. An alcoholized rag slightly props up his forehead. Elves are flying over tables and chairs and scattering everywhere, perhaps exacting revenge on themselves for having worked so

hard before Christmas. Tables are crushed, chairs are broken upon backs and heads, poker cards are disturbed, as are the gamblers. Welcome to the ethyl orgy. Candy and Cain sit in a loud yet dim corner, having ended their search for Babel without any clues, drinking together until everything makes sense.

On the other side of the room the bartender listens to the managers and occasionally snaps a notebook out to scribble in it. John gulps the vodka in the conch shell and smashes it down, shattering the shell into brittle pieces and denting the bar, then swivels his neck left and speaks. "Hey, Gil, now what did you say is the reason for Santa having in-house production of Christmas gifts?"

"Well, you see, John, it's something like this. Santa is an old dude, you know. He can't be dealing with all of those corrupt humans. They'd...mess up his dreams, his ideas about what Christmas is, and should be. Santa will not give up authority, 'cause it's so damn easy, right, boys? Hyarha! So he would rather deal with elves, since we're so honest and dependable...and gentle. After all, our livelihood is much more intimately connected with the quality of the Christmas gifts we produce than some lousy humans who don't have the first idea why Christmas exists. We are one with Santa. We know what he wants, and we deliver. We create goodness and happiness. And we protect Santa from a corporate takeover. Don't we, Monk?"

"I'm not sure. I simply know that I do not know."

"Monk, what the? Have some fun, burst the air. Get into the conversation. What do you think?"

"No, really, I do not know why Santa uses elves for gift production. How would I know whether corporations want to take over Santa's nonprofit business? I don't know what the human world thinks about Santa and his almsgiving, or about his stealing of materials that are used to provide gifts and our sustenance. But he gives back more than he takes. Probably. You would have to ask him. I'm not going to make something up and then act like it is the sacred truth. That's your act, Soupine."

"What, accusing me of lying, are you? Well, if I ever have lied, it was only with your wife."

"Gil, you know that I don't have a wife."

"Or a life. And maybe she would have been your wife if I hadn't got there first."

"Shut up! I've had enough of your shenanigans."

John picks up the pieces of the conch shell and displays them proudly in his hand before interrupting the two drunk quarrelers. He grits his teeth and opens his snarling mouth. "The both of yas, be quiet. Gil, quit lying. Hey, Riznaiokov, I finished off the vodka. Let's get some more."

"Fine, as long as the alcohol going down Gil's throat shuts him up for a while. But I know what happens when he's finished that off. Louder and louder, farther and farther from the truth and reality. Fark, I need the courage to be."

* * *

The Crooks bungalow shines black in the darkness. The nearby towering reindeer stable laughs down at its lowly guardian. Santa's mansion, with its stone facade and regal towers,

seems to ignore the other shrouded buildings. Paul, Goldinox, and their two daughters sit down for lunch in their bungalow.

“So, Grendela, do you feel like you will experience time distortion soon?”

“Dad, why are you asking me that? You know that I’m not an elf. Anyway, Jemima says that no one can tell when time distortion will leap upon them.”

“Dad, dad, DAD!”

“Yes, Hope?”

“Today I learned so much. You and mother will be proud. I sang a magical melody in front of the whole class that made everyone weep. Then, during a break, I acted like a queen, and everyone believed it. They treated me as if I were a queen. Stupid Grendela stood off to the side and did nothing.” Hope glares in Grendela’s direction and then continues. “Usually they don’t believe me when I tell them things that you two have told me about the old days in Australia or things you’ve read in human-produced books. But today it was different. I loved it, Daddy. You too, Mommy. I love both of you. I love acting. It’s a way to make the elves like you, and it’s so easy.”

“Oh, darling, you’re so sweet,” replies Goldinox. “Grendela, what did you learn?”

“Mom, I didn’t learn anything, except that elves hate me because I don’t have pointy ears. They always make fun of me. They hate me, so I hate them.”

“But Grendela, look at your sister. She doesn’t have pointy ears. They all like her.”

“Yeah, but...she’s not real!”

“Grendela, how dare you say such a thing about your sister! Go to your room.”

"I guess I'll have to hate all of you, too."

Grendela stomps upstairs, pounding her foot into a rusty nail. She swears and leaves a trail of incensed blood to embalm the dead silence. The three at the table shake their heads and eat in silence. After forty seconds, Goldinox tires of the clanking of forks upon plates. She looks across the table at Paul.

"Oh, my...dear. Paul, how did this happen?"

"It's all right, Goldinox, we won't be here much longer."

"What, have you been *talking* with Rudolph and the other reindeer again?" Goldinox immediately regrets teasing Paul about his habit of creating make-believe conversations with animals, but this time he doesn't seem to mind.

Paul and Goldinox meet halfway between their eyes and embrace the future together. Hope wishes with them, although she does not know why. She picks up on the surrounding electricity and exerts a similar charge of love. The reason behind the spark does not matter. The voltage is the same in the end.

* * *

In the darkness, after Xebo threw down Babel, no forms could be seen. The abyss was night. Cold gusts swept the damp floor, and the wasteland offered no welcome.

Babel wakes up in the darkness and wipes dank, stinking moisture off his face. "I want light. And I want it to rain forever. King Cloud, Queen Strato, dew your tenants. I'll do my penance. Has Xebo sent me to the myth of hell? He's more powerful than I imagined. I am

shivering to death. I am talking to myself. Please, someone, send warm rain. Even if the royal clouds don't exist, there must be some fluffy angels that can help me."

Suddenly Babel is blinded by a light that arches from one part of the floor to another.

"Oh, Santa, an elegant arch glowing in the darkness. Is it really there? Am I seeing things? Can it be real? Yes, it is real. It has to be. No, a mirage, a mi-ha!-rage-ah. No, I have no rage. I see no illusions of royalty. Hyarha! What is happening to me here? This is no time to laugh. That is no lie. I just want to be out, and live. Illusions, delusions, from the ground below they seep into me. Capillary action leads to distraction. I must remain sane, and not a mirror of rage. I hope I have not went crazy. No, I am truly mad if I am thinking that....Where is food? I want food. Thank you, there is a widening portal of light. Maybe the arch warped over there. It beckons me. I will go, and I will seek."

Xebo's silhouette hides the rectangle of light streaming behind him. Then he props the door open and walks forward, flashing his laser pen on the floor. Babel sees that he is entrapped at the bottom of a large rectangular space. Xebo is about 10 feet above him. There does not seem to be a way to escape. Xebo lowers a basket of food and a jar filled with some liquid to the bottom of the pool. "Babel, I'm leaving your food here. Start crawling this way before I close the door or you probably won't find it. Remember, don't even think of escape. Santa entrusted me with the key to this place. No one has a copy of it, not even Santa. Stay calm. You'll learn. Meditate or something. Think about what you've done. Yeah. Goodbye, until we meet again."

"Xebo, you won't get away with this. Santa, listen—for my screams that seem like whispers when compared to the noise of the world. Just listen for one moment." Babel crawls forward and finds the food. His stomach growls as he eats.

Babel struggles in the damp darkness, rats gnaw on his face, the whirring of the mansion sounds like the inevitable onslaught of time's slicing pendulum. "If only I could stop thinking, if only I could stop...Santa, will you hear?"

Light sidesteps the darkness. It trips darkness itself out of the abyss.

"Ah, light returns. I have never missed it before this. I will change now. I want to be good. Who's there?"

"Oh, Babel honey. It's Mom. I'm here with your daddy and Eve. Come on, we're going to tear Xebo apart for doing this. I can't believe Santa didn't catch it—it's good Jemima helped us. I wonder what's happening to his old mind? Never mind. Babel, can you get up here? Oh, go get him, Cain. I'll hold the flashlight on you, Eve will hold the door, and you can climb down and back up the ladder safely. I think Babel deserves some soft loving care."

* * *

Santa's throne room, sometimes referred to by Xebo as the colloquium room, is smothered by sweet elf aromas and pungent human odors. Santa stands in front of his throne with his pregnant stomach thrown forward. He tugs wistfully on his beard and polishes his pine tree belt buckle. Behind him, on his throne, lies his beloved red stocking hat. The white cotton ball on the end is tucked inside, directly against a hiding mistletoe berry.

Babel, clean and not wearing sunglasses, stands in the crowd, straining his eyes upwards. Santa seems to grow taller and taller, towering over Babel, casting an inviting shadow. Babel no longer understands the elves around him. He has risen above language. Now, like an animal, he senses the world with instinct. But then he returns to his mind, thrown into confusion, still looking upward. He runs out of the court, careless of the ensuing judgment.

Santa's floating mind looks down on the crowd, through the opaque black dome at the top of the room—truly an immense and useless structure—far above the dwarfed elves below. Voices shoot back and forth, yelling, screaming, and obnoxious. They swirl up to Santa, but the voices are not his concern at this time. He sees much drunkenness from above. Once again, he regrets allowing beer in the temporary courtroom.

Xebo is escorted into the court between the crowd and in front of Santa's sad, twinkling eyes. He strides toward the front, causing rippling waves in the regal red and gold rug as he approaches the one. Three feet before Santa, he stops and looks up. His eyes commiserate with Santa's. Then it is over. The reckoning must commence. Santa fills his lungs, then lets rustle out a gently blowing wind.

"Xebo, what have you done? Answer before the court. I will judge you fairly."

"Santa--"

"What did you say?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Dr. Claus--"

"What?"

"Ah, I'm so sorry. Judge Claus--"

"Just one more time, I dare you, Xebo."

"Your Honor, Judge Santa Pantagruel Claus, Philosophiae Doctor, I beg for forgiveness."

"That is not enough, Xebo. We must hear it from you. Tell us what you have done.

Admit it."

"But everyone knows what I did. I'm sorry. I just want it to be over."

"Ahem."

"Right. I kidnapped Babel, I threw him into the old indoor reindeer swimming pool, and left him in the dark. But I did feed him. I swear, I didn't mean any harm. I just wanted to protect you, Santa. Ah! I'm sorry. Now, forgiveness?"

"It's becoming difficult to conduct myself as a merciful judge, Xebo. Nevertheless, here is your sentence, which I believe is exceedingly fair: You shall now be an External Security Guard. No more patrolling of the interior castle. You will remain outside except when you must eat or sleep. The outside air is cold, but not colder than your heart. No, there is not a bathroom out there. Plan ahead or face the consequences. But elves never plan, do they? Anyway, Murtaugh will take over some of your duties, and Murdock the rest. The judgment is final. You had too much power, Xebo. No one elf should have that much power. Now it shall be split. And hand over the royal keys. Jemima, I'll be in the bedroom soon. All right, Xebo, Murtaugh, and Murdock, you three stay behind. I need to explain each of your new duties and officially transfer authority."

Santa scans the loud mob. "It's late everybody. Why don't you go to sleep? Everyone, court dismissed."

Santa receives shouts from several directions. "How can we go to sleep after this excitement?" "No way, I'm going to the bar to think this over." Chalucka screams, "The adults don't have to work tomorrow or the next day, and the daycare kids will be left to their parents, so I'm not going to school tomorrow." Several children scream their approval and then all of the youths run down the stairs. Pip yells, "Walla, Xebo!"

Santa's rumbling stomach quiets as the elves' and humans' voices rise and swirl in the air, a foggy murmuring, a bleak gray wondering about what is happening to Santa's candy cane castle.

As Santa waits for the room to clear out, he receives a murky memory from somewhere deep in his unconscious. He sees some elf children jumping on his marriage bed, and his red stocking hat lies, open, on the floor.

mob psychology

Trucker, Truck's son, shouts backwards at Chalucka. "Come on! Quit picking your nose. Let's go, before someone notices."

"All right, all right. Don't worry, everybody. We'll have plenty of time to sleep. We're not going to school tomorrow. Shut up and move."

The Dirty Baker's Dozen crawls into one of the many useless grottos that remain in Santa's castle despite eternal renovations. Twelve elves with candles lead Chalucka into the darkness. He leads while following. Sharp rocks on the floor of the tunnel scrape palms and knees and whimpers soon echo down the line. Chalucka refuses to stop. "Go on! We can't turn back. We must find out!" The dozen stubbornly pick up their candle holders, swishing accumulated tears and drops of blood with hot wax. "Hurry up!"

Chalucka is the unquestioned leader. There is no number two. His commands do not allow objections. Rarely, members of the DBD have challenged Chalucka's authority. He immediately edits any offender out of the group and revises it with a new member. As long as the majority supports Chalucka, no one will dare to step into his face.

The twelve crawl, crawl ahead, finding nothing but more twists, descents, and rising darkness to complain about. The DBD pull themselves ahead with only one hand, since the other holds a candle securely placed in a holder. Hot wax is often spilled by gang members, which results in many curses because any elves behind them are burned. Sometimes it seems as

if they have flipped upside down and are crawling on the ceiling. But they believe they are crawling inside the castle's walls, and maybe a trifling distance below the castle or beyond its walls, because they sometimes feel chills even though they are wearing their standard coats. Only Lake Didgeridoo, the old indoor reindeer swimming pool, the reindeer stable, and Paul's house embrace elves or humans with bare arms. Whether freezing or bleeding, the elves must find out where this amazing tunnel ends.

Chalucka's arms feel like they support worlds and his knees bleed dully. But he cannot give in. He is the leader. The DBD shall not know what he is feeling. "Onward, elves! What are you waiting for? The slower you go, the longer it will take! We need to find out!"

The sharp points of Chalucka's ears bend slightly forward. "Hey, do I hear muttering up there? Damn you! Damn you all! Fark. Would you want to lead a bunch of lazy deflated dwarves? I didn't think so." He grins as the elves speed up. "Yeah, that's it. Pick up the pace. We can take care of our precious knees later. We must find out!"

An hour later, the DBD feels as if time cannot be cut into anything less than eternity. Time is now useless. It's nothing but an empty name for an endless journey through pain. "How long have we been crawling?" asks Sad Ida. No one answers. Candles bounce through darkness, sweating faces bob behind them, fresh trails of blood mix with hard dirt. The tunnel has confused them. The turns, drops, and rises seem to go on forever. They wonder if there is any way to escape from the darkness. It's a long way back—in reverse..

"Hey, Trucker," says Chalucka, "what do you see up there....Uh-huh. All right, everybody. I admit that this does not look good. Too bad there's not room to turn around. Well,

it really will do us no good to back up for ages. I can't believe it. Let's keep going. We're not going to die in here. This tunnel has to lead somewhere. Didn't Jemima teach us that the North Pole is barely large enough to hold Santa's kingdom? So we must be close to somewhere."

Another blizzard sweeps through the endless night. Xebo shivers at his new outdoor post. He makes sure that no one enters or leaves the castle without permission. Interfering in the other elves' affairs was his favorite hobby. Now he is usually alone. All he has is the outside of the castle's only exterior door. It is thick and heavy, ornamented with gold along the edges, locked from the inside. He has to pull a string that rings a bell if he wants the door opened before his shift ends. Then Murtaugh or Murdock will come to the door, look through a peephole, and see if there is a worthy reason to crank open the door.

Xebo looks toward the reindeer stable to keep himself awake. The torches inside burn, but he sees no movement. It is boring. His eyes begin to close. They suddenly snap open and devour Paul's bungalow. That white house is now dark as the night. Strangely, Santa made Xebo take a short nap and listen to a hynopedia tape before beginning his new duties. Nevertheless, he is tired.

The stars provide only enough light to show Xebo the outlines of boredom. He trudges away from the castle until he can see the Northern Lights. While gazing at them, he becomes momentarily paralyzed. This has already happened a few times since he began guarding the door. He shakes his head vigorously, waking up resting energy in his body. His spine

straightens, his shoulders rise, his neck tilts slightly upwards, suggesting the dignity of a regal guard. Xebo's distant expression leads his thoughts close to his life.

"No one ever visits Santa's castle. Who tries to leave? Why am I here? I have become useless. I get a wind-scarred face and chilled muscles, creaking joints and frozen feet. I should have been a writer or philosopher, not a guard. Maybe a god.

"Santa lets me eat and sleep inside. *Zut!* Those are the only times I will not be alone. Actually, even when I sleep, I will be alone. 'There you go, Xebo, safe and sound,' locked in a room from the outside by Murtaugh or Murdock, with a single bed. I should take their damn keys and unlock their belly button windows...or their idiotic eyes. A single bed. What does Santa think I am, some sort of austere hermit? I want to have fun, to enjoy life. Like the ancient elf king, Pandar the Krackoom. He slept in a room bigger than my imagination. His world was not compressed into 100 square feet. Out here, I'm furniture. Even the polar bears and penguins laugh at me. I'm a frozen dresser. Heh-heh-oh....I do not understand, but I know it's not funny. I did not know I was a mystery. It may take me a lifetime, but I will find the clues to myself. Who can help me? Yes. I think Paul is the only one. Maybe Goldinox. I'm cut off from my elves. And my selves? That's twisted thinking. It must be the cold out here.

"Why did I have to make Santa mad? Why did I care about Babel? So he wrote something bad. I wish I could do that now. Yes, revenge is the way. There is nothing left for me out here, in the cold, bleak night. I will run inside, I will rise and scrape the high walls with my fingers, my boots will kick through rafters and swell into mighty boulders, I will imprint

floors with my stamp. Columns will crumble at my touch. Foundations will fall away from me.

There is no stopping me. Yes!

“Uh-oh. Did I say that out loud?”

Santa is sitting up in his king-size bed, under the canopy, below the mistletoe that is missing a berry. He is wearing one of his many red suits with white frills. Jemima is running her fingers along the wires and blinking colored lights that wrap the room, her wet eyelids blinking open and closed with the bursts of light.

“Jemima, Jemima. What can we do? I’ve never been sick before, just hung over. And no one seems to be happy. My omniscience is failing me. Even when I am lucky enough to hear or see some of the elves’ problems, I don’t know how to solve them. I feel old, unnecessary, pudgy. The elves and you could get along without me, couldn’t you? Humans could take care of Christmas without my help. Their factories are monstrous, their laborers more numerous, their machines’ efficiency nearly equal to that of my elves. What’s the use? I believe I’m no longer able to carry on the holiday I inspired.”

“That *you* inspired? Dear, what makes you feel that way? We all love you. You can show us the way. But I have learned that if nice ways don’t work, there are others.”

“What?”

“Oh, I was just kidding. Lighten up. Let’s talk to some of the elves. We’ll work together on this.”

"No, you know what? I think you were right. There are nice ways, and then there are good ways. They will drink, and they will be happy!"

"You are serious? Honey, I—"

"Shhh. Yes, even the kids will. They all plan to skip school and daycare from now on anyway. At least my omniscience caught that much....It will be perfect. I can imagine it now: 'Hey, what are you doing so sober? Trying to think of a way to cripple me?' Hah-hah. It's funny, and good."

"I can't believe this. You've had alcohol problems before. Now you're going to force them on all our people, even the children? We've stayed happy for generations. Why does it need to be different now? Drinking is not the answer."

"Maybe, just maybe, Jemima, honey, this time it is."

"I won't even tell you what your plan will force me to do."

"In the old days I could have sneaked into your mind and found out."

"Yeah, well, this isn't the past. So just shut up, you bastard!"

Jemima turns and runs out of their room. It seemed to Santa that she wasn't going to lean against a cold, dusty corner to weep. She was going mad.

"Jemima—wait! I can't move. You're the only—what about Christmas?"

Grotto 31 remains dusty and dignified. Babel's nostrils flare as he stares into Bubsy's cage. "Hey, Eve, come look at this. Bubsy is making signs with his hands. Do you think it means something?"

Eve walks over to Bubsy's cage and speaks with her hands on her hips. "You know what, Babel? I've been teaching him something I got out of a book Jemima wrote for Trysai, the deaf elf who doesn't talk to anyone except herself, with her hands in front of her face."

"What is it? A language that uses fingers instead of tongues?"

"Sure. Look at him. I think he actually knows what he's doing. Let me get that book. I'll see if I can translate his movements."

Eve runs down the hallway into her bedroom and returns with *Sign Language* by Jemima Claus.

Babel taps on the bars of Bubsy's cage. "Hey, buddy, maybe we can be buddies, for real. Huh, would you like that?"

"I know he will," answers Eve. "We've always known that he was special. Let's see here....Okay, slower, Bubsy. See, he knows what I'm saying. Yeah, that's it. Now I can keep up with you. All right...yep...hmm...umhm...I see...interesting...wow! Here's what Bubsy said: 'Quit treating me like an animal, for Santa's sake!' His nice little fingers were crazy. He means it, Babel. No more talking about Bubsy like he isn't here, or looking down on him. He has language. Now he's an elf-in-spirit."

"All right. Hey, Bubsy, do you want to get out of your cage?"

Paul Crooks is sprawled out on a recliner in his living room. His white care-taking suit absorbs the colors surrounding him less or more strongly according to his distance from each source. He matches the multicolored environment like a lazy chameleon. Two dark green velvet

couches subtly merge with a lava red carpet and pale blue walls. The recliner is regal purple, looking deformed because Paul seems to be an extension of it. So Paul is colored like a king, robed in deep purple with dark red streaks wrapping around his shoes and ankles. Along with these designs there are flashes of that pale, pale blue of the wall and his eyes, and light green shapes conform to his arms, blades of dark green curl around his knees, and leaping off his skin and clothes is a blue aura. Paul sleeps and remembers Australia while the TV's blue screen runs on. No antenna works up here. Paul gave up on communication with the rest of the world 13 years ago, just a few weeks after Santa hired him.

Santa was looking for someone newly married who had no close ties with relatives or friends. That was exactly what he found in the 20 year-old Paul Crooks. Goldinox and he had just kissed the breathless kiss, and as he carried her over the threshold at a motel in Sydney, Santa swooped in and offered Paul a job. No questions asked, all the alcohol and supplies he could want and education for the kids. One week later, Paul and Goldinox decided that getting a job with Santa was definitely the best opportunity they would ever see. Goldinox pushed Paul into the decision, but he wanted to go too, except for that cold. Not like the pale, warm blue sea, hot desert sands and sparkling orange sun of Australia. "But Paul," Goldinox argued, "it's Santa. How can you say no to him? He chose you. It's not your right to refuse. Let's go. Come on. Please?" "Yes." "Yes? Yes! I love you." Arms encircled and twisted and more.

That is how Paul ended up in this world of white sheets covered by heavy black quilts. Sometimes he thinks the ground has died and the darkness has finally won. But then the blankets

are tossed off and the other colors spring to life again. The bright sheets of snow and melting sunlight fill him with joy.

Yet, when Paul is not dreaming, he is depressed or anxious. The only action that saves him from going insane is acting as if he does not know what he feels. While he sleeps, it is still winter at the North Pole, where familiar midnight blue skies are filled with winking stars and several entrancing curtains wave in heaven's windows. Along with Paul's aversion to endless nights, the Northern Lights scare him, but he cannot grasp the reason. So he pretends that he loves them, he waves to them, and smiles at the sky when others are around. He speaks about their many changing colors as if he were a painter studying his palette before attempting a grand design.

But when Paul is alone, he feels self-conscious about holding in his anxiety. He lowers all of his fingers and then slowly raises the middle one on each hand and acts as if they are the batons of a conductor, which have the power to direct the rhythm and movements of those curtains in the sky. That is how he stays in control of what he fears. Paul forces himself to believe that he is in charge of the universe in order to save himself.

Goldinox walks in and sees Paul sleeping. "Just like always, that lazy—he's probably dreaming that he's a coelecanth swimming in the sea, and all the pretty women like me are fishing after him. If I hadn't caught him, then I wouldn't have to be so alone, by myself on top of the world. No one to think, gossip, or flirt with. Not even fun old Santa. I never see him anymore. That's weird...the kids should be home from the castle soon. They're really late. We'll talk. It's all I've got."

Goldinox sighs and goes over the plan she has for Paul. She shuts off the TV, strolls around the room in circles for six seconds and then sits on the armrest of the couch closest to Paul. Her light green dress complements the couch and Paul's suit. Paul wakes up, confused for a while, blinded by colors, having just seen the Northern Lights cause him to fall on his side through the ice of the North Pole like a burning meteor from the sky. He grabs his suit where his liver is located and finds that it is undamaged. Goldinox has remained unnoticed. Paul breathes out a sigh of relief and then focuses on her controlled, patient face. He sits up straight in his chair and she begins to speak.

"Paul, dear, you remember the plan, right? It's about time to take care of it. Have you talked with Rudolph? Maybe you should talk with Xebo, too. I'm sure he's not real happy right now, standing outside in the cold. Our family needs to be reclaimed, and then we need to once again live in the real world. Up here is like living in a fantasy. Let's go be real. Come on, Paul, no more of this dreaming. You are a caretaker, right? Then you can take care of what needs to be done. Honey, I truly believe in you."

"Uh...I just woke up. Yeah, it all sounds good. You always think of things so well. I guess we should. My work's done here. You get Hope and Grendela...oh, and Rudolph, too. I'll get the rest. Shwooh. This is going to be a long day."

"What does it matter? It's always night anyway. Go to it. This is one Christmas that Santa will always regret."

"And never forget," adds Paul. "I'm sure I can find and free our lost child without any problems. Rudolph is in, and I'm betting Xebo won't have any arguments. He'll get me into that

castle somehow, because I can guarantee his freedom. He's stuck in a prison. Yeah, sure, it's outside, with no bars, unlike the jail inside, but it is a prison anyway. It keeps him away from where he wants to be."

"Okay, honey. Put your thoughts into action. The other two girls should be here by the time you get back. Our sleigh is all ready. It was easy to talk one of those scientists at the lab into giving me one of Santa's retired sleighs, just so I could have 'some flying fun.' Ha! Kinda funny. We've been waiting for this opportunity for so long. Our dreams will gain the credibility of reality, right, honey? And finally--Santa has never been sick before, that I can remember. All right, enough. Let's get this done."

There is a tunnel going somewhere. The Dirty Baker's Dozen is still exploring it.

"Chalucka, I can't believe that we all skipped school for this. Imagine how much trouble we're going to be in! Anyway, we could have at least had some fun at the lake....What if Santa hears or sees us in his mind? There's no way any excuse will work."

"Shut up, little Urdu! I'll think of something. Less talking, more walking. You know what I mean? Do I hear muttering again? How many times do I have to tell all of you to shut up and crawl? We're going to find something. Go ahead, Trucker. They'll follow. They don't have a choice."

Silence. No, there are yelps of momentary pain and muted angry whisperings of hate. Chalucka's never been like this before. Usually he lightheartedly makes fun of Migmulaka and

Monica. Now he has turned into a child dictator. The tunnel keeps slithering along, and it hurts.

Over and over it has bit the elves. The DBD are nearing the point of utter collapse. Nothing can be worth this. Just then, diffused light is seen ahead. Trucker calls out and rapidly crawls toward the source. He turns a corner and sees a grating ahead. It looks like the door on Migmulaka and Monica's private sewer grotto. If the DBD has somehow reached the hideout of their confirmed enemies, there is plenty of repressed hate to unleash upon the two outcasts.

"Chalucka, everybody, we made it," says Trucker. "We found it. The end of the tunnel. Light creeps through a sewer grating ahead of me. But I know we're not in a sewer. Just like M. and M.'s retired sewer grotto actually leads to a fairly clean tunnel. It was worth it. We can stand and shake out our legs and play and laugh. Wipe away those tears and blood, everyone. Cast down those nearly burnt candles. Well, maybe not quite yet."

"Okay, Trucker," says Chalucka coolly, "that was a nice congratulations speech for all of us, but you don't know what's ahead, and neither do I. So silence yourself and move stealthily to the grating you see and peer between the crossing bars. Then back up and tell us what you found out." This message, for security reasons, was passed from Chalucka up the line of elves, so that whoever or whatever was on the other side of that grating would not hear him shouting.

Trucker creeps up to the grating and peeks through. The room is rocky, large, and bright. Nobody seems to be around. Trucker is about to back up when he notices a black mound that rises and falls, again rises and falls. His eyelids disappear into his forehead, his nostrils widen, and his mouth opens, round and quiet. He backs up, but his eyes remain riveted straight ahead. Boom! There is a crash and the second elf in line responds to a cracked neck.

“Ow!” Sobs rise as Chalucka passes up a message commanding the second elf to shut up and asking Trucker to reveal his discovery.

Trucker, still wide-eyed, recovers his breath and talks to the space in front of him. “I...I think it is the jabberwock, that scary security monster that Jemima used to tell us was only a myth. There, in there, it is sleeping. It is huge. All I can see is black, swelling and shrinking under the bright lights. Fins and spikes, gross, furry wings, and coiled sliminess move in there. I don’t want to go.”

The message travels backwards and finally reaches Chalucka: “It’s the jabberwock!” Chalucka is surprised and disgusted by the scream and its meaning. He spans the elf in front of him and whimpers echo. As the other elves whisper back and forth, Chalucka uses their noise as a cover for his spoken thoughts. “The jabberwock? So our tunnel leads to death. I wonder what other lies Jemima expects us to believe forever? Like when we discovered the jabberwock’s den shortly after leaving daycare and entering school. As soon as we explore, we find out what’s worth believing, and what’s only meant to keep us as toddlers. Mom sure would be interested in this. Well, there’s no way we’re turning back. Somehow we’re going to have to slip into the jabberwock’s den and escape. Maybe we’ll have to knock out a caretaker and a guard. We’ll do what we have to. Woo...if that monster of Santa’s breathes fire–fark! We better stay quiet.” Chalucka speaks up, but not too loudly. “We’ve gotta go through the jabberwock’s den. There’s no way we’re going to fight it. We’ll have to sneak around it while it sleeps or, I don’t know, something else. Pass it on.” When Trucker hears the plan, he faints.

The farking bar is packed. It has to be. Santa enacted, from his bed, the Anti-Prohibition Act. He has taken liberties with the elves' freedom before, but always for their common good. But now, just because he is sick and unable to keep an eye on them, some elf kids are crawling away from school and daycare. No, they decided to skip even before they knew of Santa's illness. That's even worse. On the bigger hand, the adults are now rewarded with a couple days off and are muttering about the evils that Santa has unintentionally originated. Guards are becoming violent. Don't they realize that their disruptions may cause Santa to get sicker, and even to become unable to bring his charity to the world? Paul still seems nice, though. Actually, his whole family. What a bunch of snow angels.

The three managers of Santa's factory, as always, have the best seats in the bar. That is, if the best seats are where one doesn't need to be capable of walking to get another drink. Pip entertains six people with his antics. There is John M at the end of bar, then Monk, Gilberto, Truck, John G behind the bar, and Pip himself.

"Hey guys, you know what I do when I have to sneeze in public, and there's no-whaddya call it-tissue around? I look to the left, then the right, sneeze into my left hand, and then triumphantly raise my right hand into the air-for the benefit of my spectators, you know-and bellow out: 'Walla, doooooo-gies!' It works every time. I've never been embarrassed by a public sneeze, let me tell you. That's worth another round, ain't it?"

John G begins to fill up their mugs with Santa's Northern Ale as he replies, "Of course, Pip. It's free, ain't it?"

"Yeah, John. I guess everything's free around here. Where's your will?"

"What are you talking about?" The bartender stares into Pip's bloodshot eyes with burning focus.

"You know, when you have property and then you give it to somebody else when you die. Death isn't just a word, or a thought, you know. It's an action, something real, something much more—"

Truck is boiling. "What the fark are you trying to do to us, Pip? We're just trying to have some fun here, following the doctor's orders. You think we want to be thinking about that kind of stuff right now? Get outta here!"

"What? I was just asking G if he has free will. That's not so serious, is it?" Pip sits on a stool next to Truck.

"You're *not* funny," snarls Truck. He kicks the stool Pip is resting on and it flies under a nearby table. Meanwhile, Pip hits his temple on the edge of the counter and gets knocked out. No blood, so it looks like another classic Pip pass out. The drinking crew turns away and does a toast to Truck with fear on their lips. They slam their empty mugs down and demand more. Within ten minutes they have all forgotten what happened to Pip. "Look at Pip on the floor," says Truck. "Just like always. Limbs arranged by chaos. What art, huh, boys?"

The elves' running blackouts have erased Truck's violence from their memories. They continue talking about nothing, forgetting that Santa is sick and unable to keep an eye on everybody. He wants most of them in one place, and he wants them to keep their brains soaked in confusing liquid. But forcing the four supervisors and their jester to drink is like asking

Palooka the player to present Chalucka's mom with bouquets of false words. Harder said than done.

Some of the factory workers wonder why they should bother drinking. If Santa is too sick to follow his omniscience, then how will he know if they are obeying his new act? But it gets too boring. The guards keep them from their dens, and everyone else seems to be having fun forgetting about their daily problems. They drink the solution.

"Mix it 70-30. No, 70% alcohol! I ain't here to complain with a clear mind. It does no good. The system continues on anyway. Give me that!" John G hands it to the deflated elf. Her bones push through her skin.

John G thinks to himself, "It's good that beer is fattening, or most of these elves would be ghastly bags of bones. Hell if I know why I came up here to bartend. They don't even have money, but I get a tip once in a while. Yeah, an elf-made gold ring or some time with La Rosita, or some wise words from drunken mouths that I can collect in my notebook. My book will kill. That's why I'm here, I guess. I'm sure I could start selling nicotine and make a fortune, but they don't miss it now, so why get them started?

"Ah, where has she gone? I have not seen her perfume waft through the bar for so many nights. I'm sober, maybe I can remember the poem I made up for her: 'Soft drums hum in your ears, snow wind tickles our embracing cymbal, together inside your mind we jazz the night away with jumping notes of slithering melody, rolling journeys through green dreams and a golden river washes us away together into the volcano sunset, over the edge, of the world our skin slips

like melting time, out of place, into the deep blackness kissing swaying, dancing stars, soft drums hum in our eyes.' Ah, Rosita.

"Sorry everybody, I've got to leave." John G jumps over the bar and runs out, but no one notices. The elves are cross-eyed, double-visioned, on the floor, slumped over in chairs, or hanging from ceiling fans and lights. They continue on while Truck takes over the bar. Earlier, he wondered where his son was. But Truck's memory of Little Trucker swirled down the toilet a few hours ago as he slammed a heavy mug in the bathroom. "Nice facilities," Truck thought to himself. And now here he was, in charge of the alcohol, like he always wanted to be. It felt really good to be helping Santa while he helped himself.

Now the kids, excluding the DBD, are having so much fun as they drink and swim in the warm waters of Lake Didgeridoo. So Santa commanded, and so it shall be done. If the kids emptied the alcohol provided by Santa into the lake, instead of down their throats, they could probably just open their mouths while swimming and get drunk. Yet none so clever are around to think of this. Instead, motion encircles the slippery sands of the beach. Frenzied dancing and blazing hops swirl around and between elves involved in deep, drunken conversations. Noise is the intended effect. Sounds of intoxication so loud that one's own thoughts are inaudible. As thoughts slip away forever, one can only find consolation in the present by smothering and drowning thought in more, please, more.

Monica and Migmulaka are sitting on the beach together with their knees propped up and their hands stretched out behind them, into the sand, for support. Each holds a can of beer by squeezing it between knees. They talk, in a way.

"You are so beautiful. Wanna swim?" asks Migmulaka.

"I won't obey you," says Monica. Migmulaka laughs. "Okay," she recants, "if I can get up."

"Monica, watch out! Just kidding. But I wonder where the farking Dirty Baker's Dozen is. They should be teasing us now as they stumble."

"Oh, the water will feel so good. It's even slipperier than the sand. Woosh, woosh, sail through it like a....I don't know...reindeer."

"The Dirty Baker's Dozen has disappeared. Where could they be? I do hate them, but I need them. What the fark does that mean?"

"The water gives me a chance to prove that I'm strong in a harmless way. Geez, Mig, aren't there are any elves who won't drink, or don't follow everybody else?"

"So the Dirty Baker's Dozen is scared of drinking. Maybe that's it."

"Mig, were you talking to me?"

"Yeah. What do you think?"

"My vision is getting blurry. Lead me to the water. Later, to the grotto to rest in our hammocks. Then I'll be all right."

"Yep."

Eve, Babel, and Babsy walk through the cool halls of the castle, gazing sideways at the torches burning along the walls. They approach the stairs that lead up to the tower where the Elf Penitentiary is located and note that Murtaugh and Murdock are nowhere to be seen. This is a nearly forgotten chamber of the castle, a place that only spiders and Truck frequent. But Truck is, of course, busy drinking at this time. The guards could very well be doing the same. So the kids will probably have a chance to speak through the bars with the prisoners. It is a rare occurrence. There is nearly always a guard close.

Babsy, standing between Babel and Eve at the top of the stairs, looks toward the prison, taps Eve on the hip, and makes controlled but strong gestures with his hands. Babel stares on in amazement while Eve deciphers.

"That is pretty complex, Babsy. Give me a second here. I better check the book. Okay, I got that. But that next group is weird, kinda tough. All right. Babel, he is asking me, 'Aren't they elves-in-spirit, too?' What's he talking about?"

Babsy slowly swings his arm and points toward the prison.

"Oh, I see," says Eve. "Hmm, they are for sure, aren't they, Babel? Why should they be in there while everyone else is having fun? What did they do that was so bad?"

"I think most of 'em tried to escape, but a few were troublemakers in Palooka's old gang. I think some were pirates, too, like Murdock."

"Yeah, okay. But do they ever get out? I don't think it's fair."

"It may not be fair, but...yeah, I see your point. When farking Xebo threw me into the dark pits, I was only there for a few measly hours. Now here they are, confined for years. It is

not right. I like to think in isolation, but that's my choice. I like to be in the dark, but only when it's my choice. What does Santa think he's doing to us here? We've accepted it too long.

Yolanda will be so mad when she finds out. I don't even care if Santa knows. Hey, Bubsy, do you want to let the prisoners out of their cages?"

Bubsy makes deliberate fluid motions, dancing through the air, twisting and flying and falling wherever his spirited fingers lead him. When he stops moving, his eyes tremble, he breathes in hard, short gasps, and his ears wiggle madly.

"What did he say, Eve?"

"He said 'Yep,' again and again and again."

The three look down the twisting stairway suspiciously and then advance to the first cage. There are six barred rooms which press against the inner edge of the tower in a semicircle. The prisoners are sleeping, but they groggily awake as they hear the mutterings of the three saviors.

Eve twirls her fire-lit hair around her index finger while peering into the cages. Then she turns and runs her hand through her hair while she speaks. "Now to decide how we do this. We probably should have thought this out a little more, huh?"

"Maybe we could use some weapons on the bars."

"Sure, Babel, where are we gonna find weapons around here?"

"I was just thinking. Bubsy, do you have any ideas that can be realized?"

Eve translates for the monkey. "He says to find a place to hide downstairs where one of the guards will pass by, and he will do the rest."

"What? I don't know about that. It doesn't sound safe at all. We might end up joining these prisoners here."

"Yet, Babel, it is interesting that this is one of the best opportunities ever. Santa is sick, his mind is blurry, and Jemima, from what I've heard, roves the halls in madness. Some of the elf children are hiding and the rest are drinking, just like the adults. And we are free, except for the guards. If they saw us, we would get in trouble anyway. So if you really want to go through with this, we need to do some more planning. What happens after we let out the prisoners? If we are not caught now, we will definitely be caught later. Santa will have no choice but to imprison us for our actions."

"Do all elves have to be so smart? Jeez, Eve, do we have to plan everything out ahead of time and look for every little possible problem? Come on! Damn Jemima and her effective teaching! Glad I'm not in school yet. You're one of the lucky ones, Sis. You don't let your brain get washed, you carefully wrap it like a present and keep it safe from dry, innocent facts that have been drowned in thick maple syrup—the sweet lies of Jemima, so to speak. Okay, Eve. I'm gonna be serious. I'll tell you, I'm tired of being treated like a kid in daycare. I'm tired of Santa watching me all the time. There's gotta be somewhere where he can't reach me. He's annoying, always noting my actions when I just want to be left alone. Yeah, he does stuff for us, but not a lot. I'll say thanks, what else am I bound to? He gives us too many rules. I want to make my own. Let's leave and never come back."

"Hey, you know what? I hear that the lab/warehouse/hangar where Santa keeps the presents is only a mile or so beyond the back of the castle. If we could only somehow escape. It

would have been so easy before, but now Santa's got Xebo keeping watch out there. We don't want to deal with him anymore."

"Eve, I believe we have a different escape problem before even thinking about that one. Are we going to get these prisoners out, or what?"

"Shh. Do you hear someone walking through the hall downstairs? Let's hide up here. If it's not one of the guards, there's nothing to worry about. If it is a guard, then Bussy will take care of it, right? See, Bussy signaled yes. All right, be quiet and wait. Oh, wait! Hear that clicking? That's Murdock's wooden leg hitting the ground. Get ready, Bussy, for...whatever."

"Hey you," growls Babel in a whisper, "how about some 'shh' yourself?"

The torches along the stairs cast a long, moving shadow on the wall. The shadow looks like that of an elongated dwarf. The shadow becomes shorter and more defined while the clicking gets louder. Then it runs and is eclipsed by Murdock. He glares at the prisoners and is ready to leave when he sees something strange in their eyes and walks into the middle of the room to begin an interrogation. Without thought, he turns his head to the right and is paralyzed at the sight of the children with their capuchin monkey.

"What, what?"

"Bussy, do...whatever, now!"

Bussy coils his tail behind him, crouches down on all fours and leaps mightily through the air. He sails as if he is in the jungles of South America, flying from vine to vine without effort, grasping bananas and unpeeling them while he floats through the thick, steamy air.

Murdock screams when Bussy bites into his face, ripping apart his lips and chopping his teeth out of his gums. The nerve endings hurt the most. Blood flies everywhere, covering everyone in moist red. Murdock, hunched over, groaning, on his knees, fumbles for his weapon. But he does not reach his never-used baton. Bussy pierces the skin of his hand while Babel and Eve remain petrified, as stony and cracked as the prison environment. What violence. The castle has never drank so much blood.

Murdock's other hand is not so easily devoured. He hefts it backwards and slices it towards Bussy's spine. But Bussy makes a quick twisting motion and the hook only buzzes the fur along his left ribs. The fight is becoming dangerous. Babel and Eve hold each other and almost cry. But they're too much like statues to cry.

As the great Athena and Zeus look on in marbled astonishment, Bussy bares his teeth, slathered in freed blood, and snaps his mouth onto Murdock's throat. The guard's beloved hook goes back again for another attempt, but it drops feebly to the cold stone floor as he gasps a guttural red death. The victorious monkey sits atop his victim, smiling, actually smiling, very colorfully, about his murder. He feels it was justified. Anyone who would keep people locked up must be a monster. Babel and Eve, if they could think at this time, might worry that they would be the next victims for keeping Bussy locked up for so long. But he doesn't blame them. They released him as soon as he showed that he was an elf-in-spirit.

Bussy searches through Murdock's clean, dry, right pocket and finds a key chain. He happily scurries over to the children and presents the keys to Eve. But she can only look in wonder and disgust at the keys now that they are in Bussy's blood-soaked hands. So Bussy tries

to open some of the locks himself, but they're too far above him. He needs help. He signals Eve. She sends Babel over. Babsy stands on Babel's back and opens each of the prison doors. The prisoners are afraid to come out. They don't think it would be a good idea to enter a world where this crazed monkey is loose. Finally, Eve recovers and addresses the eight prisoners who are scared of what lurks outside.

"Hey, didn't you all try to escape before? You must have had a good reason. Well, here's your chance. This time you know what you did wrong. So do it right. Xebo guards the outside door. You'll have no trouble getting past him. He's a weakling. After that, though, it probably won't be easy. But we are going to follow you. Once we get outside, I think we can just go south behind the castle for a mile or so. Then we'll reach the hangar. I'm sure there must be a plane there. Santa couldn't possibly still rely on unpredictable sleighs to make Christmas come true each year. An airplane is a machine that flies like a reindeer, in case you don't know. You can force whomever Santa keeps there to get us out of here. We'll go somewhere nice. Maybe Ireland. Jemima has nice stories about that place. All right? Ready, go. Come on, go. What can you do here? Santa isn't going to let you out, ever. He's sick right now. Take advantage. This doesn't happen every day, you know. Babel, can you convince them?"

"Uh..."

Babsy runs into each elf cage, and in succession the prisoners run out. They stand in front of their cages, unsure how they should act now that they are free. Eve shouts, "Go!" Everyone looks startled and then suddenly, as if by instinct, the prisoners follow one of their own, a man with an eyepatch. He stutters down the spiraling stairs and then weaves through the

old halls, seeming to know them perfectly although he has not walked in them since his hair was short and brown. His tattered green prison clothes rustle as he runs. Eve is scared now that she notices how thin the prisoner's clothes are. The castle is freezing. Outside it's even colder. Free elves wear thick coats all the time unless they're working. It does not seem strange to wear coats inside. It seems as appropriate as a whip in a factory.

Although the leader of the prisoners is old, he runs like a young hurricane. Everyone is breathing hard, straining to keep him in sight. The cold drafts of the castle run through his nose, bringing his old warm heart back to life. He pounds over the floor and leaps, nearly dances, almost bursts into drinking songs of ages now gone. Murdock lays far behind and above, dead and still. The vibrant ones rush on.

Back at the bar, the scene is becoming more disastrous. Truck does not simply dispense the alcohol, he forces it down grown elves' throats with a funnel. No one dares to refuse, because he is Truck, the one of the stinging whip, and he is only following the doctor's order. He laughs heartily as he walks through the chaos, the flying furniture, the flying elves, the bodies struggling to crawl on the floor, and forces Santa's liquid truth along their tongues.

Everyone sobers up when Pip springs off the floor and yells as loud as possible in his glass-shattering voice, "Did you all see that? It was an elephant. What is an elephant doing in here? Come on, let's follow it. Truck, did you hear me? I'm serious, and I'm mad about what you di-. But I'm telling you, I saw a fark, farking elephant! I'm not drunk. I'm not drunk. Did I repeat myself? I saw an elephant big as a rhino, bigger than a monkey, heavier than death,

willing itself to pound through our castle while Santa sleeps in sickness. It was real. It is real, and we're standing around, and I'm talking about it. Come on, Truck, let's go."

Pip struggles through the chaotic crowd toward the exit, which is not a space that he visits often. Truck bellows and fills the new silence of the room.

"Hey, I know it's Anti-Prohibition, and I love it as much as the next guy—sure takes the bite off work—but Pip saw something, and I want to see it too, and that means you're all going to see it with me. Understand? I demanded, 'understand?' "

No one answers. They bump and shuffle toward the doorway, many checking back to make sure that Truck hasn't taken out his whip. When they get into the wide hall, Pip is waiting impatiently, tapping his foot with his arms crossed and an eyelid twitching.

Pip spins into movement. "Come on. It went this way! Follow me."

Truck screams from the back of the crowd, "You better!"

Truck's screaming is no less powerful in the spacious halls of the castle than in the cramped bar. He woke everyone up who had passed out. Those who were drunk suddenly became clear-headed. His powerful voice knocked all swirling thoughts out of their brains and provided one alternative: "Just do it." They push, march, and then sprint after Pip. His dirty green drinking coat, full of holes, makes his run a bit cool. But he must find the mysterious elephant. Where has it come from? How did it get in? Elephants do not belong in Santa's mansion, do they?

"Come on, everybody. I'm sure the elephant is right up here. It's gotta be. I saw it with my own two eyes."

Monk bitterly whispers to himself, "Saw it with your own two lies." But he keeps running. Whips hurt, even when one runs away from them. Monk also wonders why Santa is sick. Elves hardly ever get sick. The castle's medical doctor, Dr. Zhi, never has to do any work besides giving elves monthly checkups and testing their livers to make sure they've been drinking healthy amounts of alcohol. Elves believe that whip wounds are not so much medical conditions as they are reminders. Monk feels envy, but a push from behind knocks it out of his brain.

"The elephant, the elephant! We will find it," asserts Pip. "I have seen them only in one of Jemima's books. Pictures are good, but imagine the real thing, here, to see, to touch, to watch it drink cold beer from barrels with its lithe proboscis—oops. With its damn drunken snout! A big fat elephant to hug and to ride through the halls of this castle. To tie it up in a wildebeest coat and take it outside and ride through the snowy desert of the North Pole. To see the stars, to have its snout reach up and pull down some of those twinkling lights, and to put them up my nostrils. Walla, dooogies! Chu-ha-ha. Hyarha, hyarha! Happiness flows through me. We will find this elephant that I have seen. It will enliven the castle. Santa will see it and suddenly be cured of his sickness. Then he will once again watch over us and all will be well. Anti-Prohibition can remain. I won't complain. Ahhhhh!"

Pip slides for a few feet and stops dead in his tracks. He turns back toward the stunned crowd and screams in a shattered voice, "It's Captain Bodega. He's out, and the other prisoners, too. Oh my Santa, a monkey with bloody teeth and a wicked gleaming grin is perched on some

kid's shoulder. Ahhhh! No elephants. I want to live. Turn around everybody. Hurry up! Run, run, get out of here. They'll kill us all!"

Truck turns and runs. He doesn't have to tell anybody to follow. They run as one, they scream as many. It creates a nice ghastly harmony for the chase. The Captain breezes through the halls, oblivious to the crowd fleeing before him, feeling invincible and full of endless breath. The rest of his group struggles on, looking haggard and eager for rest.

Meanwhile, Truck stops, turns, and decides that he has no reason to run. Who does he have to be afraid of? After his childhood training in whip-snapping and drunken conscience, even Santa avoided him whenever possible. He reaches for his whip and puffs out his chest, thirsty for a fight. But he is repeatedly forced back by the rows of terrified elves. They do not recognize his authority. Truck's power of enforcement is denied. He spins and runs away from his known and unknown enemies in order to avoid being trampled.

The fleeing elves have already passed the entrance to the bar. There is no other option now. They are approaching the outer door of the mansion. The unknown portal. The place where the known vanishes. The door that is as thick as a world. Truck takes out his whip, unbolts the heavy door—it is not locked—and pushes it open with his strength and that of the elves behind him, who are blindly running into the door and bouncing off it onto the floor. Each hit helps. It is easier to use the crank to open the door, but the elves are in a blind hurry. Finally, there is room to bust outside as a massive warm stream of zigzagging elves. Xebo is so surprised by the outburst into his cold world that he stands there and looks Truck in the eye, quaking with fear. Truck coils his whip around Xebo's neck and hurls him to the ground, and laughs

triumphantly. Then he remembers what's happening: "Oh yes, we have escaped! What the hell? What am I doing? Where's Trucker?"

The mob piles around Truck and pulls him along. Pip is in the midst, yelling profanely, "We must run! We must farking run. Fark the farking snettlemuckers who didn't believe me. There was a farking elephant. I saw it with my two eyes. Or were there two elephants with one eye? I believe myself. Run, run, the captain is gaining. His terrible crew will take out their cutlasses and laugh to themselves as they slowly slice through our farking throats. Where's Santa? Where's the jabberwock? Who will save us? Run, run! We must get out!"

Truck whirls his head in amazement and disgust. "Shut the fark up!" But no one will listen... The three managers avoid him, the workers are fatigued from their hectic drinking duties, and everyone is ruled by chaos. They run blindly through the dark, cold night, not knowing where to turn, what to do. Someone begins to run around the mansion, and most of the mob follows, although very sloppily as a whole. They are being led by the craziest, drunkest, most out-of-their-mind workers. The confused horde feels no desire except to follow, but Truck plans to find his unseen enemies as soon as he finishes circling the mansion. He will beat them and then return to the bar. And, after all, it is getting pretty damn cold outside, even with his thick drinking coat on.

Captain Bodega and his crew run away from the back of the castle, pounding through the snow without taking time to consider what happened to all of the other elves who had been running before them. They keep their heads down and breathe hard and try not to shiver while the captain does the navigating with his one good eye. Once in a while his right leg goes limp,

but he soldiers on, and the rest beat time into the snow with his rhythm. They must run fast.

Tattered prison clothes do not keep anyone warm at the North Pole.

Imported South American monkeys do not embrace Arctic winters without coats. Nor do they enjoy having crusty red blood stuck to their fur, frosting onto their eyes. Luckily Bubsy's coldness soon ends. The freed prisoners and the two kids with the liberated monkey eventually collapse without knowing that they had been tired and cold and shivering in the night. They collapse while the Northern Lights wave at them and seem to lightly laugh. Bubsy scurries around Babel for a while and prods him, but there is no movement. Bubsy rejects further action, crawls into Babel's shirt, and goes to sleep.

Meanwhile, Truck has finished running around the mansion and looks confoundedly for his missing enemies. "For Santa's sake! Did Pip make up those escaped prisoners, too? Well, a bloody monkey. How did I not know that bastard was lying? All for the best. I'll enjoy whipping him."

Suddenly the jabberwock charges past Truck and roars. The other elves flinch, crouch, and fall to the ground. They pound their fists and faces into the snow in terror and scream. The monster looks like a rapid shadow consuming the dim outside light. The jabberwock heavily bounds between elves, swirls around them, and silences them with its unearthly growls. All of the adult elves are stricken helpless. Truck stands confused and alone.

While Zoot, the jabberwock, leaps and thunders over lying elves, Truck runs past shivering Xebo and through the giant door of the castle. Inside he hooks a right sprint toward Zoot's den. He looks into the room and sees a long red carpet leading from his feet to a wide

golden throne, hills of hay covering the stone floor, the rusty gate left open, and leftover carcasses. As Truck walks farther, he widens his eyes in wonder at what he sees crawling out of a tunnel which lies an elf's height above the floor. He sees little Trucker tumble out of the tunnel headfirst, flip on the way down, and end up landing with his feet first on the soft hay. After this, another falls blindly out of the tunnel onto the floor, and another, and another, each narrowly missing those who were farther up the line. Finally Chalucka spins onto the floor and the DBD members shake their heads and gaze around, squinting in the yellow light. Chalucka recovers first and jumps up while shouting, "Now, we have found out! The jabberwock has left. We are fortunate to have the opportunity to see what is outside. I've always wondered, haven't all of you? I'm going. Are you coming or not?"

The other children quickly recover and follow Chalucka. Since the elves are still blinking their eyes, trying to adjust to the light, they bump into each other just after Chalucka smashes into Truck. Of course, the children scream and fall. Truck barks out commands.

"All right! Get up, all of you little troublemakers! You're gonna follow me. Looks like we're getting out of here. Yep, follow me. I'll show you the way."

The elves stand up with groggy expressions and accept Truck's orders with dazed smiles. They follow, lightly bouncing as they run. Paul watches from between the curtains of his bungalow's window as the trail of elves, led by Truck, emerges from Santa's castle and vanishes behind the castle.

"Hmmm...they seem to be heading the same way that those kids with the monkey and the released prisoners did. Guess they might get out of here, too."

Goldinox begins walking into the kitchen and freezes in the doorway. "Paul, are you still here?"

Paul is startled but he quickly recovers. "Yes, dear. I just needed to wait for the right time."

"I believe you. Go."

Paul runs out with crazed intent, not even sure if the jabberwock is around to attack him or not. He crunches through the snow and has no time to think. The only vision he sees is straight ahead, the looming castle crouching in the snow and ice with crenelated towers looking like monstrous broken teeth. The jabberwock is not noticing him. It is still busy terrorizing the elves. When Paul reaches the door, he looks at twitching Xebo, fallen in the snow, and asks him if he wants to go with them. Xebo slowly nods yes, and then his head crashes backwards and his eyelids close. Paul runs inside and seems to know where he is going. He sails through the mossy halls with a beaming smile. One time he speeds up. Ahead in the torchlight, he sees several drops of something red on the floor. It is blood! He leaps over and goes even faster. Suddenly he appears at Lake Didgeridoo.

Paul supposed that his real daughter would enjoy a lake named after an Australian instrument. He runs up to Monica, the one without pointy ears, and grabs her by the shoulders.

"The answer to all of your questions is that you are human. I am your real father! Santa stole you from us just after you were born. He told us that you died only a few hours later. But, now you see, I found out what Santa has done. He placed you into the elf society, wondering, I guess, whether one who looks different will fit in with a certain group. I'm talking about elves

with sharp ears. I'm sorry for all of the suffering you've went through. Now it will change. I will bring you with me, your mother, and your two sisters—yes, beautiful Hope and...Grendela—to Australia. Would you like that? Even Rudolph will be with us. Hey, who's your friend here?"

"I'm Mig."

"All right, I've got to hurry, Mig, and—what the hell, I heard you been living with my daughter?—you can come with us. Jeez, kids these days. Not even distorted yet and already living together in an unused sewer grotto. Don't look sad, Mig, I'm just kidding. All right, let's go."

Paul grabs Monica and carries her cradled in his right arm, while Migmulaka is obliged to keep up with the swift Australian flying ahead of him. The other elves in and around the lake watch this amazing escape and feel a desire for freedom, also. They throw their cans into the air and run behind Paul and Mig. Nearly the entire elf population is swarming outside for the first time.

Santa and Jemima wander in their bedroom, Santa looking quite concerned as well as healthy with his arms clasped behind his back and his glowing eyes focused on the mosaic floor. Jemima circles about, muttering to herself, when Santa suddenly stops pacing, springs his eyes onto Jemima's and bellows, "Jemima, quit pretending madness. It doesn't do any good. I knew you were lying the whole time. You can't fool me. Those books inspire you too much to do strange things. Now listen. You must go let the reindeer out! Many elves are in trouble, a few hundred meters beyond the back wall of the castle. I don't think it was only the auroraphobia

that got them out there. It is cold, too cold for elves. Jemima, make sure that you find them. They're freezing."

"Yes, yes, you're lucky I'm not crazy anymore. One can only pretend to be a ghost for so long."

"Strange. All right, sweep away our problem, please."

"Yes, sir, here I fly, on my broom. And maybe you should quit experimenting with lives. Goodbye."

Just before Jemima opens the door, she hears all of the elves from the lake thunder past the stairs that lead up to the throne room. "Wow! When combined, those little elf feet sure can make a lot of noise." Santa saw it coming, but did not think it was worth mentioning since he could think of no cure.

Jemima looks over her shoulder from the open doorway and questions Santa with her glance.

"Yes, I know, Jemima. It sounds bad. It is bad. My little prank became a downfall. But I believe there is still time to save us. Take care that those reindeer reach the frozen elves and bring them inside the castle, while I will deal with the jabberwock. Let's go!"

The two squeeze through the doorway, dash through the hall and throne room, tenderly walk downstairs, and then run toward the open front door, following the noise. Paul's loud group has just bursted out of the castle. The individual members of this group, from far above, look like a snake slithering over the snow. This snake zigzags toward the bungalow. Paul and Monica form one fork of the tongue and Mig provides the other. Goldinox thrusts the curtain

shut in the bungalow's kitchen and runs outside, followed by Hope and Grendela, wrapped up in dense coats. The three Crooks join the snake as it slides toward the reindeer stable. Upon reaching the side of the stable with the ground-floor exit, Paul gently sets Monica's bare feet onto the snow, opens the low, wide door, and crawls through the passage. Once he is inside, he throws some hay stalks at Rudolph and shouts, "Are you ready, buddy? It's finally gonna happen—what we've talked about for so long!"

Rudolph raises his bent forelegs off the floor, blinks, and stares at Paul with uncertainty while raising his back legs. Then he sniffs the scent of his caretaker and walks toward him. Paul crawls outside backwards and Rudolph follows. When Paul gets outside he notices that all of the kids have their arms tightly folded onto their shoulders and their teeth are chattering. Just then, Paul thinks, "Oh, damn, I forgot Xebo. No, there he is, in the back. Hey, he must have followed. Perfect."

Now the cold snake resists its environment through action, which warms its blood. It wriggles behind the Crooks' house. A large sleigh waits to swallow the elves.

"Okay, everyone," Paul says, "pile in. I'll hook Rudolph up to the sleigh."

"Where'd you get this?" asks an innocent young elf.

"Why, from Santa, of course, the giver of gifts."

"Yes, Daddy."

"I'm not your daddy!"

"Sorry, Mommy."

"I'm not—go on, son."

The little elf starts crying and hauls his heaving body into the sleigh while Rudolph waits to be hooked up. It's been so long since he's been able to fly. What if he no longer believes in himself, and just falls out of the sky and burns through the ground? Oh, here's Paul, and the preparation is complete. The crew is ready to escape. But when Paul turns around, he sees that everyone except his wife, daughters, and Xebo, is sleeping. He wonders if they all have been frozen to sleep. But one look at the taunting Northern Lights changes his mind. "It must have been those. What else could be so evil? Farking waving lights. What do you have to be so happy about?"

Now Paul pours his thoughts out of his mouth. "Hey, Gold, honey. This ain't gonna work. We can't take them away from here against their will. It wouldn't be right. We better put them in the bungalow. I'm sure somebody will find 'em."

"Okay, but, they did get into the sleigh."

"That doesn't prove that they wanted to go. Most of them probably didn't even realize where they were or where they were going. Listen: You get into the wrong limousine. Does that prove that you want to take a trip with Frank 'The Killer' Garboza? No, you get out and thank someone that you're still alive."

"Damn it! You're right. I cannot disbelieve that. Let's get the sleigh over to the front door of the bungalow and hurl 'em inside. We've got to hurry! Santa may be sick, but I don't think he will stay inside during this storm."

"No more talking. Go, Rudolph!"

Jemima is astonished and stares from the mansion entrance with her back crooked forward as the sleigh appears and the elf children are handed down to Paul by his family and Xebo. Jemima had been wondering where the exterior guard went. She whispers, "Those hypnopedia tapes saved him. Only he was cured of auroraphobia. The rest, of course, have been knocked out by fear of the Lights. Oh! I must save the rest. Reindeer, reindeer, gotta get 'em out!" She scurries over to the stable, up the steps to the fifth floor, and flies into Cupid and Vixen's room. The two reindeer are lazily munching on bluegrass, but their eyes bulge when they see the whip Jemima grasps in her right hand. The stalks drop out of their mouths and float, drifting back and forth, back and forth, as slow as fog settling into a forest, until they silently hit the floor. The reindeer know what is about to happen.

Since the reindeer can only leave through the doorway on the top floor, it is easiest to take Cupid and Vixen on errands. They are the chosen deer. After a warmup walk to the castle, they will pick up a one-person sleigh. Then, wherever the whip directs. Two minutes later Jemima and the two reindeer glide outside and fly south behind the castle, skimming the snow and ice, toward the bodies attracting frost.

Paul watches Jemima's sleigh disappear into the darkness. There is no time to wonder. The kids have been emptied out of Goldinox's sleigh and the Crooks and Xebo are now ready to leave. Goldinox shivers and asks Paul how they will make it to Australia without freezing to death. Paul scratches the side of his scraggly chin with one eyelid raised high up his forehead.

"Well, if we were elves, we could use time distortion, I think, and that would get us there in no time. Uh, we should have planned this. But, you know, like you said, the opportunity was here now, so I had to take it."

"Oh yeah, Paul, when I asked, 'Are you still here?' I was only joking around. But you took it seriously and I figured out that you really did have a chance to get Monica. So, you know, I pretended that you understood my humor. Now, here we are. So, how do we not freeze? That's all we need to know."

"Okay, I was reading a book once. If you believe, *it* can happen. No. It will happen. The more you repress an emotion, the stronger it gets. I think I can, I think I can, I know we can!"

"Paul?"

"Yeah, so let's hold our breath and have faith in Rudolph to pull us so fast that wind no longer turns cold as it passes, it simply vanishes. Rudolph, can you do that? Go so fast that wind traveling against us will seem to propel us forward. That is fast, and I know you are missing the strength of the other reindeer, but there are no heavy toys to lug through the night. Just a few humans and an elf. You can do it, Rudolph! We all believe in you, don't we?"

Paul stands at the front of the sleigh, turns around to face the rest of the group and repeatedly raises his right hand into the air, palm up, trying to incite them into inspiring yells and clapping. They understand and leap into motion. Everyone jumps up and down, sometimes stamping their feet onto the floor of the sleigh, yelling, whistling, clapping, filling the silence of

the night. Santa looks over at the distant bungalow in consternation, but he is too busy taming the jabberwock to do anything about it. Santa shakes his head and swears.

Rudolph raises his neck regally and prances in place. His shoulders dance. His spine tingles from neck to tail. Rudolph smiles and makes the sound of a reindeer, and runs, and sprints, and jumps, and does not come back down. Paul remembers a roller coaster he once rode in Perth while he screams, "Here we go!" Everyone else screams louder and bounces around the deck.

Paul turns back to the group and grins widely. His hair is unruffled. No wind is felt or heard. One who searches the sky will discover that the moon is obscured by dense clouds. The night is soft, silent, and blue. "There you go, everybody. Just as planned, we're out of here."

Monica stops moving and peers at her dad with pleading eyes and a painful grimace. "Dad, what about Mig? I....He was my friend. My only friend. What will I do without him? There's still time, isn't there?"

Suddenly Paul feels as if he is on a roller coaster, a fast, twisting, rising and falling ride that he has not experienced for—"Woah! Here we go!" Everyone's hands are unintentionally raised straight above their heads as they fly into the night, closer to the Northern Lights, and Paul winces as he shouts, "No, he didn't make the choice!"

Santa swivels his head around as he hears the whoops and happy screams become softer. Jemima watches the sleigh slide through the air above her for only an instant. Then the amazing glittering shadow they cast in the sky turns around and flies over her, driving south. Their yells float down to her, falling like snow, and no two sound alike. She is confused. A tear forms in

the bottom well of her right eye, but she lets loose an unrestrained laugh. Then she whips the reindeer. They were looking up into the sky too long. Those elves must be saved.

Santa is now dragging the jabberwock around by a halter, making it lie down while he gently raises snow-fallen elves onto its back. He trudges heavily, downcast, but taking comfort in the rescue mission. Presently, his only practical desire is that Jemima is doing better than he.

Jemima, riding a one-person sleigh behind the gliding reindeer, finds the various strewn elves who ran south. They are hundreds of feet apart, but every elf child, monkey, released prisoner, and torturer is discovered within a couple of minutes. Santa is patting the jabberwock's forehead and locking it back in its den when Jemima soars into the castle with half of the southern-escaping elves slung over the backs of the reindeer. She looks down the corridor to her right at Santa and raises a finger as if to say, "Just a second." Within a minute, she is back with the rest of the elves. Santa, meanwhile, has remained at the entrance to the jabberwock's cage, mindlessly petting its puffing snout. Jemima looks at the bodies that she and Santa have piled around the doorway, raises her eyelids and lets her eyes question and accuse him. Santa answers her by walking forward with his stomach confidently leading him. As his red belly reaches her, he taps one of his spurs on the cold stone floor.

"Honey, I know this is bad, the worst ever. What else can I say? I only hope we can recover. I'm always getting into trouble with my experiments. That's why Paul left. I thought it would be so interesting if a human were to live with elves, seeing if she would be accepted, if she could act enough like an elf to blend in. Yeah, I ruined her life. But maybe not. She and Mig

had good times. They are more mature and have gained character as a result of their struggles. Indeed, it is probably better that they have experienced such feelings, which lead to wisdom. Oh, I am only trying to make myself believe that I did not mess up. That hypnopaedia tape curing Xebo of his fear of the Northern Lights also backfired. Paul and the rest, they got out of here fast. I've never seen Rudolph so—"

"Yes, you've made mistakes. You sometimes wanted to find out too much. Just believe what you know. Don't try to force new things to become truth. We were comfortable with tradition, but where have your experiments gotten us? Look at these sad piles of frostbitten elves. If any of them are dead! I must close this door."

"The wind, at least, was still tonight."

"Yes, it's always still."

"No, it's not."

"Okay, believe what you want. See if I care. Where's your damn doctor, the one that does all of your pregnancies for you? Probably dreaming in the pile. So what are you going to do? This is all your fault. You're a doctor, aren't you? Come on, show me, show us, save them, we have faith in you. What are you waiting for?"

Santa looks older than usual. His skin is red from cold and embarrassment, his nostrils flare out as he reluctantly walks toward the bodies, his joints creak. He stares in confusion and turns toward Jemima with palms up and hands spread away from his sides. Then he remembers something. "Hey, Jemima. The elf kids are all passed out in Paul's...no, *my* bungalow. Please

go get 'em." She huffs and walks off, looking mad, leaving him to get the kids and cure the sleepers of their pleasant dreams.

Santa takes the reindeer to get the kids. He makes three packed deliveries to the castle. The piles of elves are impressive, and depressing. Santa presses in the nose of one of the intoxicated, unconscious elves. "Well," he thinks to himself, "they'll snap out of it. They've got to. That was the plan--auroraphobia."

Santa's words fly away, zooming through sad grey halls, along blurring edges, and settle in Jemima's right ear as she finds Murtaugh crouching, shell-shocked, in a small side passage as she aimlessly explores the castle. "Murtaugh, every other elf. I mean...every other elf left. What are you doing here? Does this mean that you actually like us? Thank you, Murtaugh."

"It...it was Murdock, covered with blood, left dead, mouth torn, teeth pulled, throat gone, my--there is nothing else. You made me let the jabberwock out. It must have killed him during its uncontrollable rage, just after being unleashed. My--there is no other..."

"Oh, Murtaugh, Murdock was your best friend, wasn't he? Now he's gone to a new place to dream. I wonder what he's doing right now? What do you think?"

"Oh, Jemima, I think, I think he is probably dancing with nymphs in a hot, lush South American jungle, splashing through a small river with harmless piranhas, drinking and forgetting himself, smothered in inescapable joy. Yes, and the clouds are alive, looking down on the festival and gently swaying from side to side in rhythm with the music and singing of the satyrs below. And the trees seem to creep along the ground in dizzying patterns, adjusting themselves to follow the party as it drifts along the river. Even the earth seems to flap its dusty skin, which

causes small hills to travel along the ground, tickling the feet of the revelers. Animals perk their heads up from grazing and join the bizarre crowd. The music flows through everyone and they become notes, living, breathing notes that dance and create different melodies. But their counterpoint is always perfect. Harmony rings through the forest. Before the sun rises and the fire dies away, they lower themselves to the ground, still stepping, twisting, and shaking their bodies to the echoes of the music left hanging in the silence. They do not realize what is happening, for they are still living notes, music going from loud to very soft, and from there to sleep. Then they awake the next day, but if not, it's all right. They had fun, they filled time with immense measures that are beyond calculation. All of nature will sleep with them and their dreams will laugh. You've just got to believe, and then it's all right, it's all real, and..."

"For Santa's sake, he's put himself to sleep with his hallucination. Sounded like one, anyway. I can't believe what has happened! Why did Santa, the bastard—my husband—trick everyone? Why couldn't the elves have known that his sickness was just part of an experiment to see what they would do with freedom, that he just wanted to learn? It's horrible!" Jemima runs to her bedroom, slams the door shut, leaps onto the bed prone and cries onto her huge pillow.

Meanwhile, Santa waits for a cure. He walks around, trying to look like he is thinking very hard about something, occasionally staring at the ceiling, tapping a foot, tugging on his long, wispy beard, smoothing a wrinkle in his red suit or face, scratching under an eye, or staring at the pile of elves with a sorrowed frown and then closed eyes. Finally, after several minutes, the unconscious elves begin to stir. Slowly more groans and yawns combine, arms and legs stretch

and backs crack loudly. Some look at their skin and find it blistered, red, painful to touch.

Whenever one stands up and looks to Santa for advice, he courteously leads them into the bar and tells them to find a place to rest until everyone comes back to life.

Pip yells lucid, drunken comments as he awakes. "The drunken monkey could not stop the elephant, though. No, it charged straight at him and he got out of the way, yelping with terror. I truly believe that that elephant is still in this castle somewhere, possibly swimming or watering in Lake Didgeridoo, for if I am not mistaken I think that I saw several regular little drunkards of that place run out of the castle's front door just before I collapsed from...from...what was it, the cold? Santa, I demand answers! What happened? Something is not right. I believe that lies have taken place. I do, and I, sir, demand satisfaction! I challenge you to a duel."

"Pip, please, not now. All will be answered. For now, please go sit in the bar and entertain the other elves. As soon as everyone has awakened, I promise that I will tell you all you need to know." Santa hears Pip talking to someone in the bar: "Wow! John and Rosita were in here the whole time. Lucky bastards."

"Very good," hollers Santa, but he is interrupted before he can continue.

Pip walks back into the hall and sees Bussy in the pile. "Hey, there's that damned, cursed monkey. Well, he's covered with blood and frost. I guess I can't complain. Great work, Santa."

Pip winks at Santa and holds up one of his thumbs as a token of appreciation. Santa lightly slaps a hand over his eyes and wheezes out a long gust of stress.

"Wait, wait, Santa," Pip says, "one more thing. Look at those prisoners. They're out. What are you gonna do? La-la la-la-la-la, trudumdum."

"Pip, for my sake, please."

"Yes'm."

"Finally."

Santa commands Candy and Cain to shave Bubsy's head. After trying to change Santa's mind, Babel and Eve agree to do it. Santa says, "Yes, Murdock probably got what he deserved for having been a bloodthirsty pirate. Perhaps I shouldn't have rescued him from the Irish Mafia. He really was a scary elf. After all, he passed himself off as a human and no one questioned it. Regardless, shaving Bubsy's head is a small penance." No one can argue with that, so it becomes law.

Pip entertains the elves with stories from the Bible, with newly added scenes, until the last elf is pushed into the bar. Santa fills the doorway and lets boom his once again powerful voice.

"You all remember Xebo's trial? There, in that room, or more appropriately, that gentle cathedral, I will give a speech tomorrow morning explaining what has happened and why, and I hope this will be enough to justify my actions and their consequences while also leaving us open to reconciliation. Please, for now, everyone rest. You need it. Oh, Doctor Zhi, if you would please attend to some of the elves' worst cases of frostbite, I would be full of hearty thanks for your aid."

"Is your heart not already full of thanks for my aid in sterilizing all male elves and secretly impregnating the female elves with your seed of possession?"

"Dr. Zhi! What? Tomorrow, tomorrow, everyone. Please drink, be merry, for Christmas is near, forget your troubles, but I must be gone. I ask that you reserve questions and, especially, anger until tomorrow, when it will have had a chance to cool. I am sorry. The secrets are being loosed. I am....It will never be the same. I guess I might as well hang my tears out to freeze." After this bizarre outburst, Santa turns and struggles up to running speed as he escapes to his bedroom.

The elves stare at one another, stunned silent. Then Pip breaks the silence by raising his right hand and screaming, "Walla, Santa!" An appropriate response to this is difficult to find. The escaped prisoners stand off to the side, talking amongst themselves, unsure how to act. All of the children follow Chalucka as he runs through the long hall leading to Lake Didgeridoo. They envision an elephant standing on the beach bellowing, or wading in the lake, spraying water into the air from its trunk like a fountain of memory. The adult elves urge John Gilt to begin serving drinks.

La Rosita and John make tricky mixed drinks for daring elves and serve Santa's Northern Ale to the others. Truck looks jealous as John G. slams drinks into anxious outstretched hands. But soon Truck has a mug in each hand and forgets about wanting to be the bartender. After he has drained one of the mugs into his pot belly, he shatters it against an overturned table. Only the prisoners are scared. For the other elves, this is normal, and it brings the elves back to their senses. Boisterous music begins blaring from the free jukebox and elves spin, stomp, slide on knees, do splits, jump onto tables and break chairs in half, hang from spinning fans and pour beer over heads. The elves' felt hats litter the dusty floor. Sizzling saxophone melodies burn through

their bodies and give them wings. They believe they can fly, and now they surge into intoxication, blissfully forgetting their escape that ended with a collective cold faint.

Yet the escaped prisoners still stand off to the side. Should they once again attempt escape? Xebo is gone. Murtaugh is nowhere to be seen. Dr. Zhi is presumably busy in his office taking care of frostbitten elves. Truck does not care.

Captain Bodega slides four fingers and a thumb through someone's stringy beard. It is his beard. "Hmmm...no guard, Santa sad, probably not paying attention, Murtaugh crying somewhere because his best friend has been slaughtered by an innocent little ape, Xebo gone to the land of wind and ghosts, for all I know, and us, sitting here watching a bunch of our fellow elves get drunk and carouse. No capernoiting, boys. Whaddya think? Should we get out of here?"

One of the captain's old prison buddies raises a hand and speaks. "Hey, Cap, where would we go? We didn't see much out there. We just collapsed. It would happen again."

"Dammit. We didn't even see a snow cornice. Where were the polar bears and imported penguins? Yeah, they were there, watching, doing nothing. They're supposed to inform Santa about dangers. Seems that we're not dangerous enough to warrant their respect or Santa's. We'll show 'em. Let's go. Should we take anyone else with us?"

"No, Captain. They're losers. I don't trust 'em. Look how happy they are. They already forgot everything they ever knew about Santa."

"Except that he provides free drinks. We can do without that. We'll find the hangar, we'll steal a plane, and we'll become air pirates. If not, so what? Let's get outta here."

Captain Bodega leads his crew of five as they walk calmly out through the open front door, wrapping around the castle and heading south. The moon is blue. Clouds have vanished, revealing more of the universe. Bright stars are sown into the rich black fields of galaxies. A blue halo surrounding the moon nearly eclipses the Northern Lights in the sky. Bodega devours all of this with his eyes in one glance. He smells the crisp, cold air and feels vitality surging under his skin. The others feel it too. This is no time for strolling. They take off in a desperate sprint toward the blue moon.

Bodega almost stops running when he sees a snow cornice and points it out to his followers. Breathlessly, he explains how they are formed, and that they want to avoid running off the top of a cornice and being smothered in soft, deep snow below. The dozen feet pound loudly on the hard pack ice. As Bodega scans the horizon, he sees nothing except a small, dark hill. Everything else is flat and dull and cold. No plant life is visible. Santa's animal sentries stick around the castle. They have never been informed to patrol Santa's entire kingdom. But the reasons for doing that have now arrived.

The escaped prisoners love the profound coolness racing through their blood. The hill is just ahead of them. The captain feels like taking a small challenge. He bounds up to the top of the hill in two huge steps and the crew follows. As they begin running down the other side, the hill rises into the air. It shakes and twists back and forth and they go flying in multiple directions. Screams follow them to their destinations on the hard ice. A couple of bones are heard snapping in the vicinity, and: "Oof!" "Oof!" "Oof!" "Ahhh!" "No!" "Muck!"

The captain is the first to stand up and glare into the deep, glowing yellow eyes of the hill. Two bright full moons. They seem to sit in circular caves and to reflect light where there is only darkness. There is something familiar about the eight arms sprouting from its sides, four each on the left and right side, which look exactly like furry black tarantula legs glued together in the shape of monstrous wings. As the six elves continue screaming, the dragon does not hover into the air and come crashing down, crushing their skeletons. Its four scaly legs scamper.

Bodega flees and reflects, "Yes, I remember. When I was but a young pirate make-believer, this young jabberwock I did know to run through the unused tunnels of the castle. How I wanted to pet those furry wings! Yet he never did fly. Stuck to the ground, feeding on the flesh of earth. No, I must not think! Ahhh!"

The two full moons go dark as the jabberwock rips into Captain Bodega. The monster seems larger than it is. It takes three clean bites to completely swallow the captain. He is sliced and crushed and forgotten, dying as thought overtook him.

If one had a telescope on the blue moon, and focused it on the horror outside Santa's castle, the sight would sicken open eyes. Hot blood splatters into hard snow and ice and freezes. Unseen tears fall and lie. Screams whisper through the darkness, reaching out to the moon and finding no reflection. The blue moon has turned its face, while its black back seems to be massaged by the waving Northern Lights. Their happiness floods the sky. The escaping elves are drowned in warm digestive juice after being torn and chopped. The jabberwock smiles over its brutality and runs away from the castle, toward the icy ocean to the south.

The elves in the bar do not notice the drafts sneaking into the castle through the open front door. They have passed out. Murtaugh sleeps in Xebo's empty room and listens to the soothing hypnopaedic tape in the stereo. Waves gently crash against his ears and the low, booming voice of Santa utters a pulsing chant that seems to be in the elves' ancient language. Murtaugh never could learn that old stuff. He drifts off and dreams of ascending a staircase until he reaches the Northern Lights. Then he shakes their hands and they reach in through his ears and pull out his brain, and it's an LCD clock showing this in red: "N0 6:0D".

Meanwhile, Jemima snores and Santa simmers in the bedroom's hot tub. The water eases his joints' wintry discontent and tickles his skin. But he's not laughing. A bottle of Captain Morgan, empty, sits at the bottom of the bubbling pool, distorted. Santa's jovial red stocking hat lies behind his left shoulder. He gropes for it without moving the rest of his body and places it over his curly white and gray locks. There seems to be a small bump somewhere, rubbing against his head. Santa reaches under his hat and finds what he is looking for. He pulls it out and looks down at his hand while the top of his hat lurches toward the pool. There is a white mistletoe berry sitting, waiting.

As Santa's nose tips upwards to look at the mistletoe above his bed, the fluffy white cotton ball on the top of his hat rests before his puzzled mouth. He angrily brushes his hat back, causing the cotton to kiss the back of his neck. The berry is carelessly popped into his mouth. It rolls along the back of his tongue and falls into his stomach. There it swims and becomes intoxicated in the deep pool of liquor. The poisons mix. Santa, relaxed, props his elbows up on the edges of the hot tub and drifts into sleep.

Christmas Eve

presents

Eve wakes up early on the beach. There are actually more kids in the sand than bottles. It does not happen often. Migmulaka is awake too, with his arms wrapped around the front of his legs and his salty eyes focused on his feet. Eve gracefully walks over to him and is about to ask what's wrong when she realizes the problem. Monica is gone. No one else cares about Mig.

"Hey, Mig, how you doin'? Sorry about Monica."

"Why should you be sorry about Monica? You have nothing to do with it. Go away."

"I want to help you. What can I do?"

"I don't want help, I don't need help. Shut up."

"Okay," Eve rustles, "but if you want to talk, my ears are open."

"How'd that happen? Never mind."

"All right, then. Goodbye."

"Don't you care about anything?" asks Mig. "Santa, Monica, something? Fark. I'm a snettlemucker. Fark. Fark."

"Mig, take it easy. You've gotta cope. Despair doesn't help. Have faith and make an effort. You can believe that things will get better, and feel it, and know it, and it will happen. Besides, you can't muck your mom's name. You—excuse me, please—don't know it."

"Don't talk reason to me. I didn't even want to talk. Why don't you shut up? Why don't you go tell someone how Santa ships his presents, where he gets supplies, how he barely heats the castle, how he gently steals in order to provide his charity, what elves think about humans?"

"No, that stuff is just boring. People don't need to know everything—just the important stuff. The rest is best left out."

"Dammit. You're always so right."

"Yes. Well, I have ignored most of Jemima's teachings."

"Hey, yeah, me too. I don't need that school. Maybe Monica was smart not to go. Fark it. Thanks for making me forget my problems for awhile."

"Well, are we friends now?" Eve asks with hope on her face and crossed arms.

"Although your ears are pointed, you also speak good points," says Mig. "So yeah."

"Okay, let's wake up your old enemies. I'll tell 'em that either they treat you like an equal or they will face my divine wrath."

"I like the sound of that," says Mig with a wink, "apple of my eyes."

"What?"

"Just kidding. We're friends, right?"

They walk together and nudge each other with their elbows.

"Hey, Mon—I mean, Eve. Do you mind if I round off your ears a bit? It might hurt, but—I still feel like I've went through a tragedy. Look, the tears are starting to fall out of me again."

"Oh, Mig. I don't expect you to forget. But you've gotta move on. Someday we'll all meet again."

"How do you know?"

"I have always felt it, and I believe it, and that's all."

"I wish I could say that."

"The most important things are beyond reason. Try explaining feelings--not easy. Just let your actions pulse with your heart. But Jemima draws us away from what we feel. She says we must learn her way, using her reason. But that's just to keep us in line. My brother--well, my cool brother--doesn't care a bit what she says. With his reason and his feeling, he decides for himself what he should do. That's what I think, too. Sorry, too much talking, not enough kicking dirt in sleeping faces."

Mig laughs. "Yeah."

The adult elves slowly stumble out of their sleep and amble up to the bar, intent on curing their hangovers with a--as Scottie Macleod calls it--"wee nip or two of that liquid brogue." John Gilt and La Rosita are happy and sober as they serve drinks to elves who have dark rings under their eyes, and a few with patches of frostbite, so numb from drinking that they can't feel.

John M. thinks to himself, and then yells to the crowd, "Hey, what happened to that damn Dr. Zhi? He vanished. I got a little frostbite myself--although I luckily can't feel it right now--but some of you got it way worse than me. Fark."

Truck steals center speaker. "All right, John, I agree, but shut up. Let's drink until we liven up and then go to Santa's damned colloquium hall, or room, or whatever the hell it is, and listen to what the fat bastard has to say."

Several elves gasp at Truck's bitter words, but his glare kills theirs. They look at the stone floor to conceal their shame, which is fear. Everyone shuffles anxiously, wondering what will happen next. It is not Pip's turn.

Monk bellows, "Give me some truth. Here, in this blasted mug. I can take no more. Give me that courage to keep on ignoring what I don't want to know because it means I will have to change my life and give up the job I have and take up something else which is scary because I don't know if I can do it and everyone who's so worried about success will laugh at me if I wear a cowl on my head and get on my knees to pray for something I believe in that is beyond reason, which I cannot really believe but I want to believe it so I will make an effort and I will not imagine how that something exists, but just that it is there and it is up to me to make that leap of courage beyond the overflowing mug of suicidal reason. Yeah I know that you're all laughing already but I don't care I had to finally talk and let you all know why I never did before 'cause it didn't seem real or worth it because I was thinking of this other world and wondering if I could get there and whether I should prepare now or just wait and let fate take over and throw me to...something, and I know for sure Gilberto, damn you, is calling me a liar inside right now and I just don't care because I don't have time anymore to waste my life because I believe that consciousness does not end and that makes it all worth it and I will leave you all and take life upon myself and find my own way. I don't care, I believe in nothing, because I believe in what can't be proved. Give me my courage, Sir John Gilt, you're good. Thank you, Rosita. May you bloom without thorns and spring forth new again and again. I love. One more thing, stunned onlookers, unable to interrupt the confession of a madman, I had a dream and I grabbed what I

wanted—a God that would guarantee everything forever...no end...and that thing I wanted died and then seemed unreasonable. What's all this talking about? It can't do justice to my feeling. I kissed her as if she had just died and only my lips could bring her back. Desire. Love. I'm crazy to believe. Don't let me, don't let me. Who will ground me? Ground me into the ice. I can take no more. Courage!"

Monk downs his drink and walks out of the bar, staring straight ahead, marching with precision. He has to open the castle's front door by himself. The crank is turned without effort and then Monk walks toward Paul's bungalow. The door is open. He walks in and heads directly to the Crooks' bright, multicolored living room. He sinks to his knees in front of the TV with its wicked blue screen and cries out, "Gilberto lies because he doesn't feel. None of them do. They only know, or believe, or care about what they are told and any questions are washed away, drowned, slaughtered. Here I go! I am now mad, and I believe. Santa, if you are listening, do you care?"

Monk sinks to the ground and waters the lava red carpet with his mad tears. The universe does not respond. Everything goes on as before. Moons circle planets, galaxies slowly rotate through the darkness, going nowhere new, the magnetic North Pole rotates across the Arctic, ice cracks and breaks apart, but never anywhere around Santa's castle, and the elves drink, and ignore, and forget, happy.

All of the elves are assembled in Santa's colloquium hall. They wait without reward. It is far past midnight, Santa is late, and this speech will only be the beginning of his work on busy

Christmas Eve. What will the world do if there is no Christmas? Elves pace and look at hands ticking. A bat hanging upside down on a curved pane of the opaque, black glass dome above the throne sees nothing, and it hears only reflected murmurs. There is nothing worth eating or attacking at this time. Chalucka throws a rock up at the bat and cracks the glass dome. Members of the Dirty Baker's Dozen get in his face and their newly elected leader, Trucker, takes the lead.

"Chalucka, what do you think you're doing? Trying to crack the glass? What do you expect to see? Stupid. Sit still, 'cause we're gonna listen to Santa. Who wants a rock to fall on their head or who knows how many kilograms of glass to come piercing through their beloved body? So stay. Good dog."

Chalucka wants to protest, but Trucker takes an additional step, breathes hot in the former leader's retreating eyes and stares at him with his head completely sideways. The most crushing segment of the passive attack are Trucker's flaring nostrils, an elfin sign of challenging one to a fight. Chalucka leans backwards, with his head tilted down and left so that only his right eye looks up at Trucker.

Trucker laughs and slaps Chalucka on the shoulder. "Hyarha! Good job, Chalucka. You'll be a good follower."

Chalucka restrains himself, as Trucker walks away with swinging shoulders, and thinks, "Still no Santa."

Earlier today, Jemima woke up and looked with terror upon Santa as he lay in the hot tub with the back of his head resting on the floor. His stocking hat was crumpled behind him. She

saw his arms hanging lifelessly in the water beside his legs. Jemima turned off the Christmas lights electrifying the room and rushed over and kneeled on Santa's left. She thrust her face onto his and kissed him with tears that ran down his cheeks and into the quiet pool. His nostrils were dead. They did not have their usual flare. Jemima slid her hand down to his stomach and felt the mountain of booze swirling inside him. The Captain Morgan bottle innocently smiled from the bottom of the pool. She cursed without words and lifted one of his arms out of the water. It dropped back down. She grabbed it again with more fervor and felt with her thumb against his wrist for a rhythm. It was the silent song by John Cage.

Jemima throws his arm into the water again and thinks to herself how much she hates to see him without his regal suit on. He usually appears to be so kingly. Look at the fat, at the bulge of that Adam's apple. Without thinking she slaps a hand against Santa's throat. It feels like there's a worm wriggling inside. Could it be life? She believes it is, struggling. It gets stronger. Her disgust becomes warm and fills the room. Jemima pounds on the floor with her wrinkled hands. Her bones do not appreciate it, but they decide that they will not break. Then, out of patience, Jemima hauls her arm back and blasts Santa in the nose with a massive open-palm smash.

Santa jumps up and stares crazily at the blood splattered in the water, floating down through it in pale red wisps, and the rich red life flowing over his lips. He sticks out his tongue and takes a taste. It is salty, and good. He cries, but does not feel a need to drink his tears.

Jemima embraces him and asks, "Do we always have to be so romantic?"

"When at the North Pole, do as the Poles do?"

"Are you crazy? You were almost dead. After all these years, Santa. How could I stand to lose you?"

"What does it matter? When it's over, it's done. Goodbye. The sooner, the better. I'm getting too old to handle these elves. They won't listen to me anymore. They want to do everything their own way. They won't believe anything we tell 'em, and they think tradition is simply a way to make them live worthless lives. But traditions exist for a reason, don't they? They just need to understand the reasons. If not, what do we have? Everything new, and improved, but how do we know? The past has been passed down as a present for us. It never goes old. Sure, we can exchange it, but we can't destroy it. If they don't believe that what we've been doing is the best that we could do, then all they have left is nothing, nothing to believe in."

"What's all this about 'we'? You've been around here a lot longer than I have, honey."

"This is serious, and still you don't realize....Why can't you take it seriously?"

"Life is funny. Maybe it goes on forever. I don't know. Either way....Why—from what beginning? Wherefore—to what end? Who knows? Just live and ask questions later."

"There is no later. It has to be now. The elves are waiting for me. Finally, I can justify myself. They will have a chance to do what they want. I've been too commanding. I need to erase my mistakes. I believe they deserve a second chance, and then maybe they'll give me one, too."

"At least you're taking responsibility."

"Why aren't you taking this serious? Dammit, Jemima! I don't understand."

"You're not supposed to understand. You're supposed to feel it, to believe, or at least you must want to believe, and then what you want will follow."

"Well, Madam Professor, that's definitely not what you teach the elves. What if life never ends and there is no punishment after death? Then why not become a dictator, surrounded by well-paid guards, raking in money and all the desires it can buy? If you can believe anything, then believe that morals are relative, take what you can, and have no remorse."

"Yes, but remorse will get you, don't you think?"

"Yeah, maybe me, but not everyone."

"Oh, well, let's believe that the elves will never hurt us. You know, Santa, the way your omniscience is blocked out so much? I don't think it's because you're getting old. I think it's because that's the only way you can keep on acting in the world. There's always something bad happening somewhere. If you always think about that, you'll never live. You must cover your thoughts with action, which is life, which brings ideas alive. That is the only way to believe in life.

"It is sad, but I believe it is true by reason, that we can and must tolerate anything at a distance. If we think globally, we will never act locally. If we let our emotions and feelings of sadness and despair for others take over, we'll do nothing but mope around and then die unfulfilled. When we feel sadness or despair, that tragic sense of life must be converted into action. We live by overcoming what is seen by reason through our faith that life is worth believing in. Even if we don't believe that, we want to. So let's. Oh my Santa, we seem heartless, but the faith hurts. Let's go and immerse ourselves in action the way the elves

immerse themselves in alcohol. Oh, it's tragic! But let us laugh, a vital response to seeing two conflicting realities at once, and go. It's the only way."

"Huh? The jabberwock's out! Oh my—"

"Later."

"This ignoring of the rest of the world is both easy and not easy. Hyarha!"

"Santa!"

"Hey, you're the one who said it. Hyarha, Jemima. Hyarha!"

Santa strides into the throne room. There are elves resting on the floor, staring at the dome above, with one knee crossed over the other. Others fly from group to group in the murmuring crowd, catching moments of gossip and wonder. Talk fills the air but it is silenced as each pair of eyes sees why the others have stunned expressions on their faces.

Santa begins to sit down on his golden throne, with red cushions, but abruptly changes his motion and stands up with his stomach thrown forward. He holds up a hand and all silent eyes are upon him. While he takes in a huge breath, the bat drops from the dome and flies out of the room. Santa takes off his red stocking hat and begins.

"Elves, point to me your ears. I understand why you have attempted to escape. I would have done the same in your position. This tyranny has gone on too long. You all have your freedom now." The elves look at each other but do not yet understand the implications.

"Please allow me to explain. Of course you know that down south, behind the castle about a kilometer or so, there is a warehouse/hangar where Christmas gifts are stored and

transported and letters are flown in. And you also know that there is a lab filled with sane scientists. They have finally created what I always wanted. Robodeer will take over for the reindeer. They will now be free to fly wherever they want. The same applies to you. The scientists have figured out how to arrange the factory so that no elf workers are necessary. They can take care of the repairs themselves. But I thought as long as you all enjoyed your jobs, I would not take them away. It looks like you are ready, though. For those who want to keep working, I will create tasks and give you extra benefits. For the rest—the bar is open.” Santa stops and simpers, expecting the elves to erupt with a mighty cheer. But they remain silent. Then Pip speaks up.

“Santa, what about that thing Dr. Zhi mentioned, about you being the father of all of us. And where is Dr. Zhi now, anyway?” Jemima, standing to the right in a hall behind Santa, with her arms crossed, turns and leaves.

Santa’s face turns red. “Yes, yes, I have been wrong, stupid, hideous, guilty, disgusting. What the hell was I thinking? I could have let you run your own lives. No, I wanted to control them. Yet I gave you a purpose in life, right? But there I go, breaking my own rules. Yes, you’re all related to me and to each other. Some of you might feel like killing me. I pray that you don’t. Why, why did I do it? The thought tears my brain....Dr. Zhi ran outside last night. I did not know at the time. But today my omniscience caught an image of his cracked glasses lying on the snow. He was nowhere to be seen, but I know that he is nearly blind without them.”

Santa rubs his beard between a finger and thumb and then continues. “Also, the jabberwock has left the castle. Zoot killed the escaped prisoners that I stupidly left free. It seems

likely that the same happened to gentle Dr. Zhi. I misused him and ended by degrading myself. I cannot be worthy of leading you elves anymore. Search for your own meaning. I have destroyed my life. There is no turning back. I will suffer."

Pip tries to think of a clever reply and is stumped. He identifies with Santa's remorse. Would this be an appropriate time to scream, "Walla, doogies"? No, Pip says nothing. However, Truck bellows.

"Santa, go to hell. I will whip you now for your sins. Who will stop me? Who?"

At this moment Bussy runs between the legs of several paralyzed elves and sits on the plush red seat of Santa's golden throne. He chews on his fingers and acts as if he is all alone in the room. Some of the elves cannot stop themselves from chuckling. Others join in sympathetically. Soon "Hyarhas" embrace everyone. Truck looks around, mutters to himself, and haughtily stomps out. Elves watch him go and keep laughing. Bussy then bows and hops onto Santa's shoulder.

"Will you forgive me, monkey? Bussy, that is your name, if I remember correctly."

Bussy makes some signs with his hands. "Oh, I understand. You will, it's all okay. Even when I forced you to shave your head. Thank you. But how can it be? Can it be true...are you *all* willing to begin anew? I am. Please, yes, this is the way. Jemima...where is she? Where did Jemima go? I did not notice that. Jemima! Jemima!" Santa holds a hand up to the crowd, symbolizing that they should wait until he returns. Bussy climbs down to the floor and runs back into the crowd. The dark dome above sees Santa scamper out of the room, into the hall. The torches in the hall light Santa's sides and his jovial curly gray hair. He is still bounding as he

reaches his bedroom door. When he enters, Jemima stands in the center of the room, eyeing him with scorn. The Christmas lights blink on and off and Santa stutters. After five seconds, he regains control of his voice.

“Jemima, please, listen. The elves have changed their minds. They sympathize with me. They realize, as I do, that I have made many mistakes, so harsh and grating...ah, words cannot communicate what a dismal king I have been. King, more like convict. I should be in prison for what I have done. Jemima, listen. I love life. I want to love it with you. I do not know where we are going, but I want to share it with you, with the elves, with all. Let us forget the horrid past. In our new present, we will find wonder and happiness.”

“Shut up. You sound like you’re in love. As if I care, bastard. You’re the one—oh! Forgive you? Forgive you? That I cannot do. You must do it yourself. I can’t help. I won’t love you until you forgive yourself.”

“Jemima! Okay, watch me, watch what I have been reduced to.” Santa closes the door, looks upward, and clasps his hands together. “God, one above me, even if you do not exist, you help me to think above myself, to view myself from a higher perspective. You allow me to forgive myself, which no one has a right to do. Christmas will live. Amen.”

Jemima pulls her hair and scowls and whines. “Santa, are you joking? That was nothing. Those were words to appease me. But they meant nothing. Try again.”

“What can I do?” Santa looks around at the blinking lights, the psychedelic canopy over his bed, the bells on the blanket, the red stocking cap draped around his neck, the miniature Christmas trees, a picture of Jemima and him on their wedding day at the North Pole with

penguins in tuxedos, and he jumps to his feet. He holds out his hand as if to say, "Just wait," and runs out of the door.

Santa picks up a conversation between two elves as he runs back to the meeting room.

"It was pink. Got that?"

"Yep, I got pink."

"And it was an elephant. Got it?"

"Now I do." Then this elf runs to inform another elf about the pink elephant.

"Hey, I found out what Pip saw. It was an elephant. Got that?"

"Yep."

"And it was pink."

"Well, that was easy."

Santa shakes his head as he runs and wonders why such trivial things command the attention of his mind. But then the room swells into view and many eager faces smile at him and offer hope. Santa tugs on his beard and begins.

"Elves, will you follow me? Jemima does not laugh with me as you do. It seems as if she wants to abandon Christmas. But this is Christmas Eve. We have worked for this all year. Follow me and show her that you care." The elves look at each other and shrug their shoulders. After all, they have nothing else to do. They are being replaced. There will be nothing to do but lounge around all day, drinking and pissing without a care in the world. They will be like nobles.

Some of the kids are the first to run up to Santa. Others stream forward. Chalucka emerges from hiding and joins the back of the group. He watches the bobbing elves ahead of

him follow Santa, thronging the halls. Santa beams and throws open his bedroom door. Jemima is lying on the bed, staring at the canopy above her. A few of the children jump up and down on the bed and scream for Jemima to get up. She looks angry and stands up. More and more elves come in, so many that a dozen float in the round hot tub and others are stranded in the hall.

Santa keeps smiling, hoping that his majority support will convince Jemima that he has a right to be loved and forgiven. But she folds her arms and stares at the floor. Elf children swirl around her legs. She closes her eyes and tears stream out. Jemima says, "It's over."

No one hears her. They are too busy running around and screaming as if they are all in daycare. Yet Santa's mind picks up her words. He cannot believe that this would be the ending. It does not seem proper. Santa yells, "No, it cannot be!" The elves shut up and quit moving. Jemima pushes her way through the crowd and flows past those standing outside, composed mainly of elves who just wanted to see what was going to happen. Jemima marches through the halls and finds Murtaugh at the front door. She kisses him and says that he is going with her. "Where, Jemima?" he asks. "What? Why?"

"Let's go." Jemima drags a sleigh behind her and commands Murtaugh to follow. She does not deign to notice the stinging wind. So Murtaugh ignores it too. They stomp up the stable stairs and take Cupid and Vixen away from their heated room. The reindeer warily struggle down the stairs as they are pushed from behind by Jemima. At the bottom, she hooks them up to the sleigh and motions for Murtaugh to get on the sleigh. She follows suit and they speed to the warehouse. The wind has not bit through their skins by the time they reach the warehouse. Jemima storms inside and drags Murtaugh behind her. Stunned humans cannot believe that *she*

is here. They keep throwing packages into a massive sleigh, but their eyes cannot help looking to the side as she walks by and goes up the stairs to the second floor. Upon reaching a door, she eyes the second-floor guard and twists her neck to indicate Murtaugh, who is standing behind her completely puzzled. The guard pretends to understand and places a key into the doorlock and opens it. Jemima walks into the lab and stares down the human scientists inside with her glowing owl eyes. They drop their notepads, their calculators, their thoughts.

Jemima says, "Now that I have your attention, I command that you destroy it all. None of this will ever see the light of day or the darkness of night. Do not worry, you will be paid in full and sent off with extra money to keep quiet. Now destroy or be destroyed. Murtaugh will remain here to make sure that you carry out your purpose. Understand, no new factory parts are to remain. No 'Robodeer' will be implemented. That name sounds so stupid anyway.

"This will be the last Christmas. Santa no longer deserves to be worshiped as the giver of gifts. Let corporate factories do all of the work. They have been increasing their share of Christmas every year anyway. Let them have it. Its original meaning is gone. Humans can give, but Santa has taken the elves from their lives since birth. Furthermore, he steals supplies from the world throughout the year and at the end proclaims himself a saint. A dismal lie. We're all gonna be leaving. So don't even think about saving anything for Santa. He's going, too. It's over. This is an ending. Happy or sad, it does not matter. It is what it is."

The scientists, of course, are stunned, until Jemima's glare scares them into action. They grab sledgehammers and other heavy metal objects and smash the entire lab. Soon they begin to enjoy the destruction. Satisfied that all will be carried out, Jemima smiles at Murtaugh, runs a

wrinkled hand across his smooth face, and leaves. When she opens the door, all of the workers from downstairs are crowded against the door, attempting to decipher what is going on. As the carnage behind her continues, she commands, "Carry on. Nothing to see here but some mad scientists." Some of the workers nervously laugh. The guard simpers. Jemima sweeps her arm in front of her, clearing them back and sending them to their jobs. They comply and she goes out as they stare at her tied-up hair.

Santa sits in his room, surrounded by the elves, oblivious of Jemima's actions. He and the elves reflect on what has been happening and where their present is going.

"Yes, Mig," Santa says as he pats a child's hair, "life will be easy now. There is nothing to worry about. All is good, and there is no need for a purpose. Just enjoy life. Ah, the time and melody of Christmas. Well, I need to get to work. I must prepare myself for time distortion. It hurts, as you all know. Well, you older ones anyway."

"But Santa," Mig asks, "if we are all related to you, then why don't we have any of that ultra-mind that you have?"

"Oh, well, that's a good question. I'm not sure. If Dr. Zhi were here, maybe he could explain it. You know what, that really doesn't make sense, that you are all my children yet you have no omniscience. My true children, before the days of Jemima, could often read each other's thoughts. And none of you really look like me. You look like deflated dwarves. What the? I would say this is most disturbing, but it might be a good sign. Unfortunately, we'll have to explore that later. Christmas must be taken care of first."

Santa gasps, "Jemima, no!" He runs out of the room and the elves stare. Then they get bored. The adult elves head for the bar, the kids for the lake. John G. and La Rosita plan on going outside to Paul's bungalow. Bubsy leaves with Eve, Babel, and Mig.

The Clauses are face-to-face near the castle's outer door. Santa grabs Jemima by the shoulder and screams, "Jemima, what have you done? You are destroying our future. This is what everyone wanted. What do you want?"

"You damn idiot! I don't love you anymore. You are disgusting. To forgive you would be death. The elves deserve to leave, and I'm going to let them. What are you going to do? Stop me or abandon Christmas. The choice is yours."

"You, you demon. After all I have done! The elves have forgiven me. Now they have a chance to live. But you're destroying that. All of the money, all of the time, that I invested in those scientists—gone! I will need a new reindeer caretaker, the elves will be forced back into work, and I will be forced to remain a benevolent dictator. No! This time, Jemima, you are not right."

"Stop me or stop Christmas." Jemima slips out of Santa's grip and runs to unknown parts of the castle.

Santa thinks to himself, knowing that he cannot catch her. "Wait a second. I will have all of the reindeer. How can she escape without them? There is no other way. I wish I could see what she is planning. I don't think there's any way she could leave, though....Oh, where is that jabberwock? Ah, he is gone. It is tempting to go look for Zoot, but I must do my duty and

complete this Christmas. At least I believe in myself. To the lands of darkness, I will bring light!" Santa raises his arm in accord with his thoughts, but is embarrassed as he hears elves approaching. He slips out of sight, into the hall that bends toward the jabberwock cage.

Eve and Babel and Mig sit on the beach and Bubsy scurries between them trying to attract attention. When he has something to say he perches on Babel's shoulder and makes a commotion until Eve diverts herself to interpreting his signs. Then they laugh. Bubsy's has funny fingers.

Mig asks Bubsy, "Hey, didn't you, uh, kill someone? That is a crime, right? Why doesn't Santa care? So you're bald now. Oh no, what a punishment." Eve stares at Mig with her eyes wide open, afraid of what Bubsy might do. He replies with a blank expression. Apparently Bubsy understands that Mig does not.

"Well, Mig," answers Eve, "I guess Santa has more important things to do right now. And he wants to be even nicer than he was before. As for us, we don't have to worry about time distortion anymore. We can be kids forever and no one will mind!"

Chalucka walks into the beach through a corridor, holding a book in front of him as if his hands form a tray. He walks toward Mig and intends to start some trouble, probably because he is now the outcast instead of Mig.

Chalucka presents the book to him with a nasal tone. "Sir Mig, thou hast done a great service in taking upon thee the noble service of serving thy fellow elves by being their humble leader. But thou must needs have a proper education to serve well thy legions. Here, then, is

why I have taken it upon mine self to present you with this book that will tell you everything you need to know. Examine it for at least two hours every day and you will never make a wrong decision. My service ended, I go in peace." Chalucka drops the book and walks back where he came from. Once he is inside the corridor, he hunches over, covers his mouth, and begins laughing. He walks back up to the entrance and peeks out at Mig to see what he does.

Babel is examining the cover of the book. It says *You*. On the back of the cover, there is nothing but the same light green that is seen on the outside. He opens it. There is only one page in the book. It is set into the back cover. It is a mirror that cannot be moved. One must stare at this page to find answers. Eve reaches over and says, "Give me that!" She tears the book out of Babel's hands.

"Babel, this book isn't for you. But Mom will love it. I'm going to give it to her as a present. You don't mind, do you, Mig? Chalucka was just joking, after all."

Mig crosses his arms and mumbles, "Whatever."

Elsewhere on the shore of Lake Didgeridoo, Trucker and the rest of the Dirty Dozen sit in a circle and plan shenanigans. Trucker is the leader. What he says, goes.

Trucker points to an elf and says, "Any ideas?"

"Trucker, sir, maybe we could embarrass Monica. I hate her, don't you?"

"Stupid! Monica escaped with her real dad! Idiot!"

"Sorry, Trucker. Let's get that new outcast I've been hearing so much about then...er, Chalucka. May I have another beer?"

"What do I care? They don't run out. Stupid!"

The humiliated elf grabs another beer from the center of the circle and chokes back the tears by swallowing the alcohol. Trucker snickers and goes on to the next elf in the circle.

"And you, what is your plan? Or are you just stupid?"

"Actually, Trucker, I believe that I should like to drown you."

Trucker stands up immediately and demands an explanation. "Sad Ida, are you challenging me? Do you want to fight now, little Urdu, or should I give you time to let your terror build?" Someone begins to rise. Trucker points at him and growls, "Stay out of this, Rex!" Rex sits back down.

Sad Ida responds to Trucker's challenge nonchalantly. "Now would be good." Trucker yells and rushes forward. This gets the attention of everyone on the beach and in the water. The other children form a ring and yell as Trucker tumbles to the ground to tackle the offending elf. They each roll through the sand and Ida grabs a handful of slippery dust and hurls it into Trucker's mouth. Trucker begins to cough and clutch his throat. He tries to plead for mercy, but he cannot speak. Sad Ida grabs more dirt and throws it into his eyes. Trucker's eyelids snap shut, entrapping several specks of dust. Tears flow and gasps erupt.

The children's yelling has stopped. They cannot shut their eyelids. Bubsy looks as if he is ready to intervene, but Eve grabs him by the tail and shakes her head at him as he turns around with a grimace.

Sad Ida smashes her foot into Trucker's nose and he falls onto his back, one hand clutching his throat, the other covering his bleeding nose and trickling eyelids. Chalucka runs up and says, "Enough! No more. He deserves no more." Chalucka thinks for a moment and directs

a question to the other members of the Dirty Dozen. "Can I be your leader again?" They turn away and disperse. Apparently, the gang is over.

Trucker sits up now, but no one feels like comforting him. They are ashamed at what has happened. Sad Ida is not exactly a hero, but neither has she become an enemy. She leaves the beach through the corridor and vanishes. Trucker sits crying by himself as the other elves go back to where they were, murmuring. He gets up and runs away. The other elves open up, talk, drink, and laugh.

Since John Gilt is nowhere to be seen, Truck is serving drinks at the bar. This is noted by Santa and quickly forgotten. He receives a related notice from his omniscience that John G. went with La Rosita to stay in the bungalow. But there are more pressing difficulties to deal with, such as Christmas and Jemima's location. Santa slips out of the jabberwock's cage, aiming to get outside without having to deal with any elves. Once he reaches the outside, he grabs the sleigh that Jemima used earlier. He crunches his way to the stable by the light of the stars. The Northern Lights are nowhere to be seen. Perhaps they are looking for the Southern Lights.

Santa pounds up the stairs and waves for Cupid and Vixen to come over to him.

"How are you doing, my deer? Today is Christmas Eve. At least with you I can forget all of the bad things that have happened. Let us go and celebrate Christmas. Who knows, this may be our last. Yes, yes, let us go." Once again, the two reindeer clumsily struggle down the stairs, and at the bottom Santa hooks them to his sleigh. "Onward, to the warehouse!"

Upon reaching the warehouse and walking onto the floor of gifts, the workers salute Santa, but they also look nervous. Santa senses this but simply says, "Carry on." He walks upstairs and sees Murtaugh. Murtaugh's eyes bulge and his nostrils swell.

Santa says, "Yes, Murtaugh, I realize all too well the ancient charms of Jemima. You can go downstairs now. I will get you back to the castle soon. I will take care of these problems." Santa mutters under his breath, "Why didn't I hook up a phone? Never thought it would be worth it, till now..."

When Santa strides in, the scientists tremble with fear. Some crouch and cover their heads with their hands. Why? They do not know.

"Do not fear, scientists. I know what has happened. There is not much to do now but follow Jemima's advice. I will pay you more than I owe. You can go back to your families, if any of you have one. Remember, you cannot tell my secrets. Well, all of this will be taken care of later. Okay, the destruction is done. Go up to your living quarters and do what you want. I need to concentrate on Christmas right now. All right, thank you."

The scientists release sighs of relief and walk to the door. Santa stands to the side and regally nods at them as they walk by. When they get to the landing, they take the stairs leading up and vanish into the heights.

Santa thinks, "Now, to deal with the presents." He walks down to the first floor and addresses the workers who are throwing gifts onto the sleigh. "All right, ready to pay attention? Here is what we must do. Continue what we are doing. Yes, that's it. I will take care of any

problems with the sleigh myself before leaving. So proceed, and thank you for all of your hard work."

Santa heads for the door, remembers that Murtaugh is waiting, and motions for him to follow. As they go outside, Santa considers going to the bungalow and having a talk with John G. and La Rosita. But he abandons the idea while sailing back to the stable. Upon arrival, Murtaugh walks inside the castle and stands at the door. Three minutes later, Santa returns with the sleigh and says, "Murtaugh, there is no need for that now. Go into the bar, have fun."

"Really, sir?"

"I am Santa. Yes, go. You are one of the best."

Murtaugh smiles, throws his lone weapon, a laser light pen, to the floor, and dashes into the bar. He is amazed, and then he is sucked in. Soon he is one of them, and the world, although it does not make sense, is absorbed into the spins of his drunken dances. Murtaugh makes many friends and feels like he finally belongs in the castle.

Murtaugh is once again amazed when a child with blood and dust smeared across his face struggles into the bar between bouncing legs. The child walks behind the bar and tugs on Truck's pants. Truck looks down with anger until he sees that it is his son, humiliated. He bends down, out of sight, and listens to Trucker's story. At the end, with rage in his eyes, Truck springs up and pierces the music with a guttural scream: "She what? Everyone stop, now!"

They stop, but the music plays on. Truck picks up a mug and hurls it at the jukebox, but it keeps playing. He jumps over the bar, smashes it again, and still the music does not shut up. He rips its power cord out of the wall. The plug stays in, but the wire snaps. Now, boiling

hotter, Trucker addresses the frozen audience. "Yolanda's nice little daughter attacked my son out of nowhere. And she had helpers, too. Hey, Yolanda, get out of my sight before I kill you. Now, everyone else, follow me to the beach. This is not going to be tolerated. Everyone, go! I will follow to make sure that you all see what must be done if we elves are to live together in peace. March!"

Pip begins to say "December" but curls his tongue over his top lip just in time. He goes out first, followed by the rest. Trucker pushes them forward, yelling, threatening what he will do when he sees that little cheater. Elves look at each other with worried eyes and frowns but say nothing. They arrive at the beach and it is deserted. Truck runs up to the water and looks into it deeply, squinting, trying to find something to attack. But there is nothing.

"All of those bastards. All of 'em. They must have all been in on it. Any of you? Hey, Yolanda, get over here. You're gonna show me where your daughter and all of her new friends are hiding."

"But I don't know!"

"You better."

Murtaugh dares to speak. "Leave her alone."

"Oh, and what are you going to do about it, Murtaugh? Mr. Tough Guy, think you're going to use a laser pen on me? I don't need eyes to strangle you."

Someone screams, "Oh, what will Santa do?" As this echo dies Murtaugh steps forward and challenges Truck with his stare.

"Hey, Murt," teases Truck, "you miss your friend, don't you? Killed by a little old monkey? Hyarha! Imagine what will happen to you if you try to fight me. You better turn around and get back in the crowd before I tear your head off, bitch."

Several elves gasp. They have never heard this word used in public before.

Murtaugh walks up to Truck and spits on him. Truck lashes out with a massive uppercut. Murtaugh flies backwards into the sand and wipes a hand across his split gums. Truck leaps forward but Murtaugh pushes him to the side with his feet. Immediately Truck gets up but several of the elves surround him and attack. He tries to hit them away with the back of his hand and his elbows and knees, but they do not quit swarming around him. Their hits add up and begin to sting. Truck does not make it to Murtaugh. He slowly lowers himself to the ground and passes out. There is no longer any doctor to appeal to, except Santa Claus, but they do not want to approach him with this information. Murtaugh suggests that they leave Truck there and search for the children. Everyone happily latches onto this idea as a fine way to escape, and they are off.

The adult elves bustle into the corridor and begin searching the halls and rooms of the castle for the children. They cannot find them anywhere. Someone suggests that they might have went into the tunnels again. After all, isn't that a place where they are safe from the adults, and a way to escape from the castle through the jabberwock's den? Yes, but who is small enough to get in there? Only Trucker, who they left crying over the body of his father. Why should he help them now?

Murtaugh has a plan. He tells everyone around him to keep searching while he goes back and tries to convince Trucker to go into the tunnels.

Murtaugh walks onto the beach and Trucker is still slumped over his dad, heaving and wiping the tears off his face with the back of each hand. Murtaugh nears him and almost whispers as he speaks.

"Trucker. Hey, I'm sorry about your dad. I really didn't want to do it. But he....Will you please help us to find the others? I know you hate them now, but we're going to have to live together. Please."

"Go away."

"All right, I thought so. I guess they'll all die."

"What?"

"Well, we think they're in the tunnels. You're the only one that could fit in there to find them. I know that those tunnels scrape your knees and would make you cry even more, but, if you don't, they might go into the jabberwock cage and be eaten. Wait, he's gone now, isn't he? Damn. This is not working!"

"Shut up. Go away. Leave me alone. Everyone hates me and my dad. We'll go start our own country and build our own castle. Get out of here!"

Murtaugh walks out and finds the hunting adults. There is still no sign of the children. Pip believes he feels a tinge of omniscience and decides to search outside. The others muster their courage and go out. Ah, the snow shows no reflections of the Northern Lights. The darkness gives the elves courage. Pip runs straight for the bungalow, and the others follow. There are lights on. The searching elves burst in. In the living room, John G. and La Rosita sit, talking about the blue TV screen.

Their new topic is the congregation of elves that is suddenly streaming into the house. They pack the house and bring it alive as they search for the missing children. The children are found huddled together upstairs. Eve, Babel, and Mig are missing, as is Bubsy. Candy and Cain, without a word, run out of the room to search their apartment, leaving Amad in the bungalow.

The children look up with their foreheads first, and when their eyes meet those of the adult elves, they are overjoyed. The expectation was that Santa or Jemima—or, worst of all, Truck—would find and punish them. Young elves jump from the floor into the air and release good screams. They run around and randomly hug adult elves and each other. John G. and La Rosita edge their way into the room to make sure that everything is okay. Yes, the fugitives are safe, for now.

Someone comes up behind John G. and taps him on the shoulder. It is a person they have never seen before—an Inuit. He slips the hood of his parka down and speaks in English.

“Are you John Gilt? The only one that would like to make money in Santa’s castle?”

“Uh, yes. How do you know? What do you want?”

“I have been told that you know who Pip is.”

“Pip Filletdermaus? Yes, he’s right here. What is this all about?”

“Oh, Pip. I have a message here from someone you used to know long ago, in a previous life, or something else so strange that I have forgotten it. This is from one Pumblechook: ‘I was your earliest patron and the founder of your fortunes. Do not forget it.’ That is all I have to say to you, Pip.”

"What? That doesn't make any sense. I never knew any damned Pumblechook. Who sent you? Why are you telling me this? What do you get out of it?"

"I'm sorry. I do not know, my lord. I only remember that there was a knock on my door two days—or nights—ago, and I was told to come here. It was a difficult struggle. But I had to tell you. It was my duty."

"Well, thank you. What was your name?"

"Guildencrantz."

"Guildencrantz, let me invite you into Santa's castle for a drink. Maybe you can find out what has happened to Jemima. She has gone quite mad and appears to have some plan to force us all out of the castle while Santa delivers Christmas presents later tonight."

"Anything you want, my liege. Just give me a purpose. I will delve."

"Great. I love this. Finally, I have become a king. Come on everyone—children too. Let's go celebrate the arrival of this stranger. Hyarha!"

Pip runs down the stairs, out the door, into the castle, into the empty bar and waits. It is soon filled. Loud talking begins. John G. and La Rosita tend the bar. In this environment, all is well.

Pip communicates the current problems in Santa's mansion to the stranger. The Inuit says two letters over and over: "I-C. I-C." Pip continually replies, "Yes, I know it is cold. Here, drink more beer. It will warm you."

"So, what was your name again?"

"I believe it was Rosenstern."

"Okay, Rosenstern. Will you try to find Jemima? Will you talk to her and find out what she is going to do? Thank you. I and all of the other elves will be heavily indebted to you. And now, no more talk, for it slows down our drinking. Hyarha!" And with that laugh Pip drains another mug, gets it refilled, and whirls through the room like a pinball, bouncing off elves in every direction while screaming. When he gets caught for a moment between two or more elves, he uses the time to drink. His world is split in two, but both versions are identical.

"Is that two Rosensterns? Guildencrantzes? Gentle, gentle, good person." Then Pip gasps and nearly chokes while drinking. There appears, before his eyes, two Trucks, and two Truckers, both bloody and boiling. There is no music to be silenced this time. The elves quit moving and wait. The two Trucks lean down and each picks up one of the Truckers. The Trucks place the Truckers on their shoulders and speak with one voice.

"I hate you all, and never again will I work for Santa. I am going to leave with my son. We will build a new country with our own castle. How can you even look me in the face? I am a man. I have never bowed. Cowards! Let me see you live. I will walk out of here. Anyone who follows me, if they plan to attack, will be killed. But if you wish to find a better place, find a thick coat, hat, gloves, and boots, and follow me to a new land. Goodbye, to those I hate."

The Trucks walk away and the Truckers display their dirty tongues. Pip almost leaves, but he cannot leave the easy fun that he has at the bar. Pip's mug drops to the stone floor and shatters. He holds one hand in the air in grand fashion, smothers his nose and mouth with the other hand, sneezes, and then unleashes the loudest "Walla, doogies!" ever heard. The other

elves feel relieved and slowly become louder. Soon they have forgotten about Truck and his son and the party is back.

Candy and Cain are giving a stern lecture to their two wayward children and the family pet while Mig quietly sneaks out of the Roccos' apartment.

Candy asks the children, "Why can't you be more like your brother Amad? He is a good little boy, hanging out with all of the other elves, but here you are, hiding out by yourselves. Eve, what are you hiding behind your back?"

"Oh, Mom, you'll love it," Eve replies. She swings the book *You* to her front and hands it to her mother.

"Hmm, what is this? *You*? What kind of name is that for a book? What? It's just a mirror. How stupid!"

"Yes, honey, it is insipid," says Cain.

"You mean dull."

"Yes, sorry about that, Candy."

"Eve, why do you have this?"

" 'Cause Chalucka gave it to me."

"Oh, so you like him now? Why? He's mean to Mig."

"Mom, I am nice to Mig, and now so is he. Just take the book. No more questions, please."

"All right, Eve. You two should go join the other kids. Last time I saw them they were in Paul's old house. By now they're probably partying at the lake—as long as Truck isn't there. I wonder what he did? Honey, we better go find out what's happening."

"Yes, but first of all, kids," says Cain, "we want to make sure you leave. And get this monkey back in his cage. You already released him once and look what happened. He killed one of the guards. He's lucky to be bald, but alive. Go on, get back in your cage, Bubsy."

Bubsy grins, baring his upper gums and teeth. He refuses to move.

Eve whines, "Dad, we'll take him with us. Don't worry, we'll make sure that he doesn't kill anybody."

"All right, then."

"Yay!". The kids leave with Bubsy scurrying between them.

By and by, Candy and Cain go into the hall and see Santa puffing past.

Cain stops him for interrogation. "Hey, Santa. How are things going? Will Christmas still be all right this year?"

"Cain, everything's all right. But I've got a lot on my mind right now. Hey, you haven't happened to see Jemima lately, have you?"

"Well, only before she left your room earlier today and threatened to plan something."

"Yeah, that's exactly it. So the answer is no? Ah...the misery of a thousand worlds. I'm sorry. I have to go. No matter what, Christmas is going to happen. Hey, if Jemima asks you to leave with her, somehow, will you?"

"Santa," says Candy, "what happened with Truck and his son?"

"Let me check. Well, he's gone. One disaster after another. Or maybe that's a good thing. I'll think about it later. So, will you?"

"What, Santa?"

"Never mind, I'll find out regardless. Goodbye, you two. Nice book you got there, Candy."

"Yeah, it kinda is, actually." Candy opens the book and stares at the mirror. She runs her hands through her hair. Her curls bounce and return to where they were previously. She sighs. Cain has to grumble before she is startled back into the hall. Candy attempts to erase her behavior: "Well, Santa said it's a nice book."

"Yeah, yeah. We've got to find out how the other elves are doing. Maybe we can get Mig and Eve together. Where'd that kid go, anyway?"

"What if they don't want to?"

"Who cares? We've got nothing better to do, do we? We've been replaced."

"Yeah. I'm bringing this book with me then," says Candy. "I might need something to do."

"You, you, you."

"Why, why, why."

"We whisper sweet reason into one another's ears. But we end by getting tangled in such a web of logic that it doesn't matter whether what we say is true or not. It's the feeling that counts."

"Cain, honey, where'd you get that?"

"It was just something I read."

"Must have been a good book."

"No, it was in a notebook."

"Whose?"

"John Gilt's. I found it in a cabinet behind the bar once when he was gone with La Rosita."

"Yeah, her. So, the bartender writes things like that?"

"Yeah, he's weird. Don't look in his eyes for too long. You might get scared."

"Don't tempt me. Come on, then. Let's go. I'm excited now. Yes, I'm bringing a book into a bar. Let's see what they think when I open it to the first page and their own drunken faces stare back at them. Now that might be scary."

"Well, at least we have something to do then. Let's go."

dreams

Monk prays on the ground floor of the reindeer stable. After having stared at the blue screen in Paul's house for an hour, he came out of his trance and decided to commune with the reindeer. Once inside the stable, he did not like the stares that the reindeer gave him and the things they seemed to say with their eyes. On each floor, he met the same fate. Down he slid, finally arriving on the lichen- and hay-covered floor of the stable. Therefore, John G. and La Rosita entered Paul's bungalow without encountering Monk. Soon after that, the escaping kids ran in and John and Rosita offered to harbor them.

Monk's eyes are closed and he receives a vision. He looks upward through the floors and roof above, all the way into the sky. The stars slowly circle around him. No moon smiles on his prayers. He stays stuck to the spot and keeps trying, but nothing changes. His actions are useless. Monk gives up and falls face first. The cartilage in his nose crunches. His breaths bring in more hay and lichen than oxygen. The torch he brought down from the second floor goes out. Darkness clings to Monk and he warms to its embrace. He sees a spiraling staircase and climbs it. Along the way he sees the eight reindeer hovering in the air, spinning in circles. He waves to them and continues upwards. When he reaches the top of the staircase, there seems to be nowhere to go. Then the sky tips upside down and he is falling toward its heights. He splashes into the sky as if it is an ocean. Clouds tickle him. Stars swim by and leave glowing trails in their paths. Monk reaches for the stars, but they slip away. Without notice, his lungs quit

working and he floats to the top of the sky. Suddenly the sky flips again and his body falls off the top, down through the middle of the staircase. The reindeer are gone. Monk's body crashes through the roof and floors of the stable and stops on the ground floor where he began his journey.

Monk wakes up, shakes the daze out of his head and sits up. He wipes his forehead with the back of his hand and then crawls out of the stable. There suddenly surges in him a need for communication. He rushes toward the castle and into the bar. Candy and Cain are just entering and he nearly knocks them over with his mad dash. Monk calls for silence. The elves in the bar are immediately reminded of Truck, yet they give Monk the benefit of their doubt and quiet themselves.

"My friends, I have learned something that must be shared. We need to turn our way of looking at the world upside down. We should rule this castle, not Santa. Why should he receive earthly pleasures while we receive hellish escape, this alcohol you thirst for eternally? Listen, let's leave, as Jemima has hinted, while Santa is busy with Christmas. We get nothing out of it but work and drinking and fatigue from time distortion—except for a few master conformists. Sorry, I was one of those who had an easy life, but no more. I give it up, and I hope you will follow me. I'm giving up more benefits than most of you, yet it does not matter. We have all been mistaken our whole lives. Santa may not have planned for us to suffer, but that is what we were doing while we filled our lives with pleasure, or as I see it, delayed questioning the purpose of life. Let's find Jemima and do what she wants. It's too late for Santa to intervene. He's

already up north in the warehouse overlooking last-minute preparations, I'm sure. Soon he will take the reindeer with him, and then, somehow, Jemima will show us how to escape."

Gilberto says, "Sounds risky and stupid. Let's drink. The answers will be delivered whenever fate decides--and that can be found in the Bible translated by Jemima. Who will argue?"

This satisfies the elves. They have never liked Monk or understood his calm ways. He stays off to the side and thinks, and feels mild cases of depression. Yet he refuses to let himself be cured. The elves drink: Ah.

Now that this situation is ended, Candy walks through the crowd and shows the book *You* to random elves. "Excuse me, you, have you read this book?" Someone answers, "Why? Life doesn't need books to be lived." "But it's only one page," argues Candy. "Here, look." She then opens the book and the other elves look at their bloodshot eyes in the mirror as they lift mugs up to their mouths and drain them dry. Many turn away, some spit out their drinks and drop their mugs onto the floor, while a few appear unaffected. Brothers look at each other and say, "See? I told you why you looked like an idiot." Sisters giggle at each other and scream, "You are so funny. Why? 'Cause beer makes your belly bulge." Mothers and fathers look down on kids and say, "Why are you following our example?" The kids respond with, "Servants imitate masters" or, "I love you, but is Dad my father, or is Santa?" Eventually Candy completes an entire circuit of the bar. Those who were not confronted hear of the book and search it out so they can see themselves. Candy stands up by John Gilt and La Rosita and holds the book open. Elves line up and stare into the reflecting glass.

The book has seen the faces of many you's. The elves look into the book in a search for answers. Yet the book reflects to them only more questions. Some questions hurt enough to change the elves, although they still do not find the answers they are seeking. The book tells them that something is wrong, and they begin to believe it. John G. and La Rosita watch the line move because they have nothing else to do. Many, as soon as they have searched the mirror and left the front of the line, curl to the back, eager to look into their own eyes again. Elves are starting to trip over cracked mugs on the floor. Shoes are getting wet. Talking is nonstop because alcohol is not flowing through mouths and elves are excited to share what they have learned. The elves believe that Jemima will show them what to do. Yet they must wait for Guildencrantz to find her. Until then, they will continue searching *You* to see themselves as others. This makes it easier to judge the person that stares out of the mirror.

Santa has the reindeer. Santa has the gifts. He has a huge sleigh. How does it all work? Where does Santa get the money for this expedition and the gifts and the alcohol and the building materials? Who heats the castle? These and many other questions are not worthy of being answered. Focus must be given to Santa's mind control. He is entering time distortion. Time crawls along now, struggling for breath while Santa flies in front of it to new lands.

There are people who sit in front of their Christmas tree all night in the hope that they will catch Santa or find indirect proof that he does not exist. Suddenly gifts appear under the tree out of nowhere. Santa is faster than sight. The people are stunned while their subconsciousness finds a way to explain this miracle to their reasonable minds. All that can be done is this: "You

must have bought those presents and written 'From: Santa' on them. You must have lost the receipts. You must have paid cash for them. Go outside now and throw the proper amount of cash outside. Then it will all make sense and you will not have to doubt your own thoughts. Go, do it now. I shall wait, and when you arrive, I will help you to forget the plan that we have made." So the person gets rid of the proper amount of money, sits back down in front of the tree, looks at the newly arrived presents, and cries, "I knew it. Only the presents I have bought are under there. The ones that Santa is supposed to bring are nowhere to be seen. Good night." And with that they fall asleep and later believe that anything pertaining to the subconscious agreement was only a ridiculous dream. In this way, their belief in themselves is saved. Santa was not seen, therefore Santa does not deserve belief, for what does he do but get a good name while letting others complete his supposed work?

Santa flashes on through the night, intent on his mission, unaware of the happenings at the castle. He only catches a glimpse of Guildencrantz walking through the hall that leads toward the old indoor reindeer swimming pool. "I wonder why?" he thinks, but then Christmas catches his mind and drags him away from home.

Guildencrantz tries to open the door of the old indoor reindeer swimming pool. He is surprised when it begins to swing open since he was informed by Pip that it is always locked and only Santa has a key to it. Additionally, that key itself is supposed to be locked within some safe. But here it is, and the door swings open and bright fluorescent light hits Guildencrantz's eyes. He shields them momentarily and then walks into the room. There is Jemima, scurrying around in the bottom of the pool from side to side, carrying bundles of something red in her arms.

"Excuse me, Jemima. What are you doing? All of the elves are worried sick about you."

"Who are you?"

"Oh, sorry, I am...well, I was sent for, you see—but really it was for another reason.

Anyway, I am here to find out why you ran off."

"None of your business. Am I a child to be looked after? Hey, you are a fat one."

"Yes, yes, I have been known to eat. But Jemima, I have heard that you went mad for a while. Do you think that it might have happened again?"

"Zut! What a stupid question! Whether I answer yes or no...oh, stupid! Guildencrantz, I was only acting. Now leave me alone. I have work to do."

"Yes, yes, that's right! Guildencrantz is my name. I keep forgetting. But how did you know? You just asked me who I was. And now you know?"

"Santa must have told me. It doesn't matter. Just tell me, what are you doing here?"

"Jemima, I have been informed that you are planning to help the elves escape from the castle while Santa is busy with his hobby. What is the—"

"You have been informed of a great many things, I see, young man. You must have talked to that blabbermouth, Pip. Imbecile! No, he is smart and clever, but still—stupid! You see these bundles, I imagine? They are sticks of dynamite. I found them upstairs where Santa keeps many supplies and so many other things that I hate to talk about because they are so boring. By the way, covering the explosives was a blanket without bells on it. Here they are in the bottom of this pool, which is the deepest part of the castle, even lower than the lake. This is where the reindeer learned to fly, by first holding their breath at the bottom and then springing upward. If

we ever get more reindeer, then this room will be used again. But that should never happen.

Why am I telling you so much? I guess the movies I watched as a kid still hold an influence on me.

“Guildencrantz, as this may be my last day in this castle, my mind is leaving it to focus on older days....I was a syrupy young aunt, unmarried and smart. I gave advice to my sisters and to my friends, but not officiously or superciliously. I just wanted to help them, for I could not act myself, only think. Then, one night, a very special Holy Day, I spied Santa’s face covering that of Jesus in the church where I went to pray for the world every night. From my pew, it appeared that he merrily winked at me. I got a chill, and then I became excited. I stuck out my tongue and the cross on my necklace flipped up by its own power and imprinted itself on my tongue. Look! See it? It’s still there, but faint.”

“No, Jemima. I’m too far away.”

“Well then, come closer. Then you can also help me with my duty as we talk.”

Guildencrantz reluctantly grasps a ladder that leads to the bottom of the pool. While he is climbing down with his back to Jemima, he feels a chill go down his spine, and then his nose tingles. When Guildencrantz reaches the floor, he happens to look at the open drain, and he fears falling into it. Jemima catches him with her practiced stare just as the fear crosses his face. Then she sticks out her tongue and crosses his eyes. Now that he has seen the evidence that confirms Jemima’s story, she can continue. They each set dynamite on the pool floor, taking it from a huge pile along one side of the pool.

"So, Santa inspired me to love the world more actively. I flew out of church, and not to home as usual, but to a bar. There I found a cheery old man and went home with him. My God, when he pulled off his mask—you see, it was the day after Halloween, so I thought it was fine for him to pretend to be a vampire—I gasped. That vampire was Santa! He melted me against his belly and asked if I would go to live with him up at the North Pole. For some reason my constant praying had caught the attention of his omniscience several times. He knew that I knew a lot, and only needed a place to apply it. I had got a professional teacher's license, but I never used it. My sisters supported me, and for that I was humble toward them and gave them helpful advice. So I came to teach the elves. It was much different in the beginning. What was that, about sixty years ago? Yeah, I guess so.

"Formerly Santa had married elves, and when they died, he took on a new wife. That would explain why elves also possess time distortion, but not to the degree that Santa has. So as to what Dr. Zhi said, I can only believe, hope, and pray that it is not true. For there is no reason for Santa to do such a thing. He is a man past the age of needing to reproduce. The elves are related to him anyway from the old days. So we are all family here, except the humans that Santa has enlisted. I always did hate those scientists down south! Now it seems that Dr. Zhi is gone, so we will never know. I still love Santa, but I want to live somewhere else. I want to die in the world, not up here. It will be good for the elves, too. I remember, a long time ago, when I was just a teenager, I took a trip to Harlem and met Langston Hughes near the Cotton Club. My parents stood behind me as he crouched down and said straight into my eyes, "Hold fast to dreams for if dreams die, life is a broken winged bird that cannot fly." That seems to apply

perfectly to my plan. We must fly so that our dreams will become real. I would also tell you about the life of Santa now that I am warmed up, but that would take more than a lifetime. Let it suffice to say that he has special powers because he is, at heart, despite his numerous flaws and mistakes, a saint. I really believe that. Okay, Guild, do you know what we are doing?"

"Uh...you want to open up the pool so you can throw those scientists into the icy cold below?"

"Ha...no. We're going to have a very long wire leading outside. From there we can sink the entire castle into the icy depths. The North Pole is floating on water, you know. I imagine that a massive explosion aimed at the entire foundation will shatter the ice and let the castle fall to the bottom of the Arctic Ocean. It's amazing that it hasn't happened naturally. There must be some enchantment holding the ice together here. Guild, I miss the stupid ways of the world. I'm thinking I might take the elves to Ireland. That's where they are from, according to Santa. I believe him. It seems probable.

"All right, Guildencrantz, keep moving. We don't have forever here. Get this ready, get everybody out, and then our old life sinks away. We can crowd into Paul's old bungalow, or even the reindeer stable for awhile. If you're crazy feel free to go to the warehouse/lab/delivery station up north. When Santa gets back, I'll tell him what must be done. He will have no choice. He'll have to leave. I know what you're thinking, Guildy, but Santa doesn't know what I'm thinking. My plan will work. He's just too damn busy right now to pay attention to me. I said get to work! We also have to pile all those bags on top of the dynamite to suppress its upward force. The aim is to shatter the ice below. All right, then. No more slacking."

"Yes, yes, ma'am. Thank you for giving me something to do. I have been bored and bewildered, but now it seems to all make sense. Life will be good when we leave, won't it?"

"When *we* leave? What do you mean? You just got here. You're not one of us. Why should we take you? I thought you might enjoy having all of these unused buildings to yourself. I suppose we could give you some polar bears and imported penguins too, to work for you, but you don't know how to talk to 'em. Anyway, Guild, that warehouse/hangar/post office up north, the stable, Paul's nice bungalow, they could all be yours."

"Jemima, I know you're way sharper than me, but I don't want to do what you're saying. I don't want to live alone. Let me go with you. I really don't know where I'm from. I just got a message and arrived to find out what to do next. It seems like fate that I am now here. I believe that I should go with you."

"All right, Sir Guildencrantz, you seem like a nice guy. Let's find the elves, explain the situation, and get them out of here. Come along, then, let's lay out the rest of the dynamite. We're also going to use some blasting gelatin, for your information. Oh, will you please carry this contraption? We're going to need it to cause the explosion. Thank you, Guildy."

The bar is loud. Yet it is an unusual loudness which cannot be attributed to drunken screaming, intoxicated chair-breaking, inebriated fan-swinging, or sober cries for more, another glass, please. The happy roar of the bar is the result of a book that has ripped minds open and enlightened their accustomed darkness. Witty banter takes the place of drunken sparring.

Conversations on the status quo topple arguments about who can drink who into the dust below.
Something new is in the air.

Bubsy is trying the mirror book out for the first time. He tries talking in sign language to his other half, and it responds without delay. Nothing Bubsy does can fool the other monkey. They are doubles. Pip looks on and sees four monkeys doing sign language. His nose wrinkles with resigned consternation. Babel and Eve see Amad and, instead of tripping him as usual, they pat him on the shoulder and say, "How's it going, brother? Good? Excellent. We're all family here, anyway. Thanks to Dr. Zhi. What a great man he was, and what dead glasses his soul has left behind!"

"That stuff scares me," replies Amad, "so please don't say anymore. Be nice to me for once or I'm going to leave and play with my other daycare friends."

"Daycare? Since when has anyone went to daycare? Even Yolanda won't go there, and now look at her kid, the one who beat up Trucker. And we were supposed to be the bad kids!"

"Well, maybe Ida had a good reason."

"Amad, of course she had a good reason. Trucker is a...I don't know what. We were just kidding, you know? Let's not just be family, let's be friends."

"Okay," says Amad, "if you two aren't trying to trick me."

"I wouldn't ever do that," replies Eve. "Neither would I," chimes in Babel.

"All right, let's do the Rocco cheer!"

"No, no," says Babel, "let's do the Jemima cheer. She's got something cool hidden behind that wrinkled forehead."

“Okay, one, two, three—whoa, Jemima!”

Jemima walks in at this second with Guildencrantz at her side and everyone hushes, stares, and then murmurs.

“Yes, everyone,” she says, “my plan is ready. Everybody out. We’re leaving. The castle has nothing to offer us anymore. Your jobs are gone. Extra benefits for working? There’s still nothing to do. So here you sit, and stand, and lie, drinking yourselves to death. Alcohol is not as healthy as you may have been led to believe. It kills your brain. You have been distracted from life too long. I want to take all of you back to the elves’ native land, Ireland. There is much anger there, but we will be hidden underground, deep in forests, far from the humans’ hellish wars. If you’re wondering how I’m going to get Santa to go along with this, look at my friend Guildencrantz here. Although he was a stranger, I think he deserves to go with us. He has no home and is delightful in times of crisis. That “T” you see atop the box he is carrying can be pushed down and then dynamite will blast apart the foundations of the castle. The explosion will spread sideways, up, and mainly downward. The entire castle will shatter and the ice below will be weakened. The castle will break through the shattered ice and sink to the bottom of the ocean.

Santa will have no choice but to leave with us, unless he wants to live in Paul’s place and just take care of the reindeer. There’s no way he will build another castle unless he uses his time distortion powers to turn the rich into beggars or criminals, but I don’t think his stealing would go to that extreme. Moving on, the factory will be decimated. The world makes more than plenty these days anyway. They don’t need Santa’s help anymore. Those machines are almost faster than you elves—no offense intended—and they don’t get tired. Christmas is their business.

So let them do their jobs. But you elves are not drinking machines. We need to go somewhere where you can live, truly free and capable of fulfillment. That won't be found up here in this cold darkness.

"If Santa refuses to take us away from here in his massive supernatural sleigh, then I will nag him and nag him until he gives in. There will be no escape for him. Oh my God! What if he leaves us alone to fend for ourselves? No, Santa, my husband, my love, he would never leave us to freeze. If the worst happens, we can take an airplane or use one of Santa's retired sleighs, but then I may have to order the scientists to stay around and create some more Robodeer.

"It is sad, elves, what I must tell you. You all have auroraphobia. John G. is safe, but every single elf has an artificial fear of the Northern Lights. Santa had you conditioned as children by that perhaps disgusting, perhaps venerable, Dr. Zhi, to go into a fetal position at the mere sight of those beautiful waving Northern Lights. It is tragic that he should have made you fear something so beautiful. I did not do it, but I allowed it. Please forgive me, and now, I want to make up for it. Let us go out and escape from this place. Some of you may be thinking of the good memories that you acquired here. Don't despair, just take them with you. This castle does not need to stand for you to recall happiness. But its fall will end the torture that you have all unknowingly lived from birth—except you, once again, John G.

"Elves, also, do not be mad that John G. never told you how the real world is. That would have been a breach of his duty, and John G. is a very loyal person. Note that I did not say loyal to the bank. John G. was not paid for his duties as bartender. He took them so he could someday write a book about Santa. Now that this place will be destroyed, it will be safe for him

to write that book and unleash it upon the world. Then they will see how myth compares with truth. History will shock the humans. History is God. Still, I hope that the humans will uphold Christmas. It arose for such a good reason. But now what it is... There is still time to change it, to curl the Christmas tree back to its roots. My God, I rant. Let us go, elves. Santa may be busy, but if we take too long, who knows? He may show up and stop us dead in our tracks."

A child who was known to attend daycare cries out, "Santa will kill us?"

Compassion shoots through Jemima's flesh and blood as she reassures the child and everyone else concerned by closing her eyes, clasping her hands together, slowly opening her eyes again and gently saying, "No, child."

Then Jemima turns to go out and waves a hand at the flabbergasted elves, two humans, and one monkey, signaling them to follow her.

Once outside, the elves, some looking in the sky for the Northern Lights, are asked, "Are there any others inside? Is everyone here?"

"Well, Monk ran out of the castle screaming," says Gilberto, "and no one's seen him since."

"I'm right here, stupid," screams Monk. Gilberto looks at him and says, "Oh, sorry, I didn't see you there, E."

"E?"

"Yeah, your last name is E, isn't it, Monk E?"

Monk and Bussy contain their anger directed toward Gilberto's intended insult and let it sink into their feet. They stomp heavily on the snow and ice while Gilberto stares at his feet, embarrassed by all of the staring faces around him.

Jemima takes control again. "All right, Guild, do whatcha gotta do."

"Yes, ma'am. Here it goes."

The crash—

Santa's sleigh flies in and lands near the castle. Santa is too late to stop its fall. There is still a quarter of the world that has not received Christmas this year, although Santa is easily winning the competition against the slowly spinning globe. The light cannot catch his speed. He stays shrouded in darkness and joy while he gives to the world. He has become a myth, an inspiration to millions, and yet he is just a strange man who has lived on for centuries and done some bad things, some good things. He lives, and now his dream is crashing to the bottom of the ocean. The castle, and especially that beloved factory that inspires the joy of so many good and bad children, breaks through the ice. A bat flies up from the castle, but it dies in mid-flight and falls, sinking through the cold air and water below.

The crumbled and shattered pieces of the foundation are pushed into cold water by the immense weight of the castle's intact upper reaches. Lake Didgeridoo immediately spills apart and melts through the ice. Now the pieces of the castle float down together to the bottom of the ocean. No submarine is there to witness the collapse of Christmas. Aquatic animals have abandoned this area. Three miles down in the darkness. Here, on the wet sand, the castle will sit

and wait for the world to flip, for the oceans to spill out into space, so it can then fly away too, floating to unknown reaches of the universe to be collected, studied, and put in a museum as a relic of a civilization that once lived and celebrated life.

So Santa lets out the biggest scream ever heard, enough to deafen a world, and some think that it may cause the earth to quake and split apart, but nothing, except his voice, moves.

When the silence can be heard, Jemima asks Santa, "So, what do you think? Are we going now?"

"Jemima, you...well, I have not stopped you, but you will not succeed in stopping Christmas. I'm going to finish it. I can see that it's more important to some people than others. What were you thinking? The misery of a thousand worlds. See if I come back."

"Well, you cold-hearted, big-bellied, pipe-smoking adulterer! Talking to me like that! Your ears are going to get tired when you come back later today, I'll tell you that. Come on, elves, let's go wait in the Crookses' bungalow for my husband to return."

The elves follow with downturned faces, unsure how they should react, and blindly funnel into the bungalow.

There they wait without words while Santa, devoured by anger, races through the world and gives away more presents than anyone deserves. It doesn't matter whether a household participates in Christmas or not. This time, all receive Santa's alms. Still, Santa feels revenge in his actions, even though none of the materials or finances used to create the presents were stolen from Jemima..

The stars sing and birds twinkle and the ocean rustles and trees ebb. Santa is mad, but he does not have time to focus on what he is going to do about it. During his rage, he gives and gives presents, even in countries that generally do not celebrate Christmas. After this he is sure that they will. How can they not believe when they see that gifts—no, miracles—have shown up in their houses overnight?

Santa smiles and goes on while the elves sleep, and humans in darkness dream of love and other demons, while some in the light are already praising their gifts, and monkeys look for signs of the day when they will be equals with all of the other animals, especially those who have domesticated themselves.

Trucker and Truck are nearing the limits of their strength. Little Trucker is flopped over his father's shoulder. As they trek without snowshoes and feel the cold bite through their thick coats, they begin to lose hope. The castle long ago shrank over the horizon. Then they see a dark hill ahead. Perhaps it can shield them from the blistering wind. Otherwise, they are doomed to freeze. Truck feels the magnetic force of the bump in the night. It pulls him forward as if by magic. Before he realizes it, he has run all the way to the hill and is now catching his breath. During his gasping, he sets Trucker on the ground. After Truck recovers, they go around to the right side of the hill, away from the wind, and rest. Truck removes a hulking pack from his back and digs inside until he finds the materials for setting up a small tent. Suddenly, the hill begins to turn. Truck and Trucker are knocked over as something low sweeps them off their feet. Then they hear the roar of the jabberwock. The two fugitives are frozen.

No screams, no pleas, no prayers, just the roar filling the night. Then the echo, and the silence. Unexpectedly, the jabberwock bends his face down to the two shivering elves and stares into their fear-frozen eyes with his mouth closed. His furry spider wings are outstretched magnificently to either side of his body. Snorts from his nose shroud the elves in a dense fog. The jabberwock slows its breathing so they have a chance to catch its meaning. Finally, Truck recovers from his paralysis and thinks he understands the jabberwock.

“Trucker, I think the jabberwock wants us to travel with it. After all, let’s think of this. I know that it actually can fly, but not forever. Sometime it will have to touch ground, and if any humans see it, they will kill it and display it as a modern-day dinosaur. We will scout ahead for him and find safe hiding places, and in return he will get us somewhere safe and warm and will not eat our little, measly, unsavory bodies. Let us go, son. Maybe our travels will find warmth before our bodies lose heart. We cannot go back. Ahead is the only way to go.

“Zoot,” says Truck as he turns to face the jabberwock, “I have long admired your cruelty. It has served as an example to me of how to retain authority among cheats and rebels. Let us work together, bonded in violence. If you wanted to destroy us you would have already done it. So let’s go. I am getting cold. And don’t worry, we’ll help you find some bears to eat. Okay, are you ready to fly? I’ll go as far south as you want.”

Trucker then spies something moving a few meters away. “Dad, what’s that?”

Truck stomps over and says, “It is alive. A petty rodent....What? It has a stalk of bluegrass in its mouth. It must have stolen it from the reindeer’s stable. What the hell? It’s a lemming, and it’s all by itself. A lemming by itself? Definitely some sort of thief, so it’s become

an outcast. Well, there's only one way to take care of these kinds of problems." Truck squishes and then grinds the lemming's furry body into the snow and ice.

And with that, the jabberwock seeming to approve with nods of his jagged grin, the two fugitives climb onto Zoot's back and his furry spider-wings part the icy breeze while the elves huddle inside their coats. They disappear over the horizon to known parts of the world.

Santa has raced faster than the rotating of the earth. The largest Christmas ever has been completed by Santa and his reindeer, alone. Every spare present was given away. This was no time for saving, as Santa felt the burn of revenge within him, urging him to give presents rather than deserts. He skips down in front of the pool where the castle used to pose and jumps out of his sleigh.

The reindeer are unyoked and let loose on the snow. Outside they usually feel cold, but their journey has overheated their flesh. Smoke curls from their fur and raises a cloud above them. Instead of running free, they remain in place, exhausted and hoping that the wind will begin to penetrate through their hot coats. Santa sees no one, so he reasons that they must be waiting in the bungalow for his reaction. He glances at the reindeer and sees that he does not have to worry about them escaping. They look at him as if in a daze.

The door of the bungalow is opened and Jemima stands in its place. Santa begins to run toward her, but then thinks differently and slows down to a lumbering pace. Eventually he reaches the doorway and brushes past Jemima, saying nothing. Inside, the elves are assembled everywhere, sitting on counters, the stove, the floor, couches, chairs, stairs, a bookcase, and a

heavy-chained chandelier. Santa turns in a half-circle from his right to his left, examining everything in his view. The fatigue of time distortion is evident on his reddened face, including the frozen beads of sweat on his face that are melting. He breathes in loudly, still catching his breath, and looks ready to address the horde of castle destroyers.

"Elves, lend me your ears, for the last time. You can all leave now. I see that Christmas will never be mine again. I will have to give it to the world. To persist in using you now for my ends would be cruel and disastrous. Your minds have been opened to the world. I cannot stop you now. Freedom is yours to use. Consider it a gift that you have given yourselves. Not that I'm happy with how things have turned out. I was hoping that Christmas and our happy castle could last forever. But now I see that one or the other had to die. Better then that it was only the material and not the idea that has died. So now others can take my idea and build it again with their own materials. Yes, now Santa's castle will spread over the entire world, connecting it and giving it meaning, at least once per year. I say goodbye. Jemima, I hate you."

Santa does not wait for reactions. He walks out through the open door and grabs Cupid. The reindeer is kicked in the ribs and made to follow Santa. Together they walk toward the space where the castle plummeted through the snow and ice. Santa lowers himself onto his knees and motions for Cupid to stay back.

Wild gestures are seen from the window of the bungalow: waving hands, threats to stand up which end with tortured sinking, the frenzied tearing off of a red hat and the curly gray wig beneath, bows into the snow, a shaking neck, pulling on ears, fingers pointing upward, in circles, and lastly downward.

Santa's curly gray wig, along with snow and ice, is packed into his red hat and then hurled into the rectangle ocean. He stands up, suddenly relaxed and at ease, and leads Cupid up to the edge of the water. Together they stare down into nothing but an unrevealing surface. Santa then steps onto the reindeer's back and, with his feet still reaching the ground, pushes them both over the edge.

They float through the water in a downward spiral. Santa clenches his teeth and Cupid's antlers. Already, his shiny bald skull feels cold. This reminds Cupid of his training in the old indoor reindeer swimming pool. But as to how long he can last in this cold, he has no memory.

Santa wishes for the bright red nose of Rudolph to light his way through the inscrutable depths. They keep plummeting, nearly out of air, until a smack jars them out of their watery fall. The jagged edges of rocks cut Santa's skin and slice through Cupid's fur. As the blood screams out, so do their submerged gasps. Then water pours inside, filling their lungs and putting them to sleep on the floor.

Santa has a dream, a beautiful dream. He is an angel. Blazing ecstasy flows through his cotton veins, shadowed reason keeps his brain safe from being taken over completely by the sun's blinding light. Together they create a lovely dark conflict called life: the mad light of love and the austere, numbing darkness of reason.

Music unheard dies away before he knows from where it travels. A waving halo forms above his bald head. He sees death upside down, and it is only a reflection of life. Together they create an eternity of reality, each a beginning and an ending.

The moon settles above the yellow tendrils of his halo and spins. Light, darkness, light darkness, it is all one. Santa touches the halo and cannot feel it. Nevertheless, it moves under his power. He aims the halo and moon toward his mouth, and both shrink until they fit and slide down into his stomach. They have no flavor. For some reason Santa now feels like laughing. He laughs until tears flow. They are so cold that they freeze on his face. His hands grasp at them, but they remain fixed. Santa sits still now, cross-legged and bald, enveloped in the upper part of a small, round cotton cloud. By craning his spine and neck far forward he sees that the small cloud is attached to the peak of a fluffy red mountain. Besides this, Santa sees only alternating beams of light and darkness that dance around him in every direction, curving as if on the inside of a dome. Then bubbling blue water appears below him. He thinks about diving into it when he is suddenly grabbed by something unseen and tossed into a dark cave.

At the bottom of the steep cave, the smell of alcohol wafts through Santa's nostrils. While searching with his hands he finds something furry next to him. It responds to his touch and he discovers that it is a reindeer. He pulls it by the antlers to the bottom of the pond of alcohol. Then Santa pushes off, climbs onto the animal's back, and they begin to float upwards through the liquid, then through the air. Soon light is seen and they fly into it. Looking back, Santa sees himself, but as a wretched sleeping giant, and notes a bottle of Captain Morgan lying on the bottom of his hot tub.

Santa awakes on the bottom of the Arctic Ocean, his body chilled, and tries to wake up the reindeer lying next to him. But it is no use. Cupid is dead. Santa is alone in the darkness. He swims upward and sees a light. Suddenly it seems as if he is swimming downward. But he continues without hesitation. Upon reaching the light, the water disappears, spiraling stairs materialize, and Santa notices that he has been holding his breath ever since he began swimming. As he begins gasping, he begins falling. Desperately his fingers cling onto the transparent crystal stairs. After falling a few steps, his desperation slows and stabilizes him and now he only needs to concentrate on crawling down the stairs by letting his fingers do the walking.

There are the seven reindeer, hovering in circles, blinking as Santa walks down the stairs on his fingers. Suddenly gravity grabs his belly and causes him to somersault through the air and crash through a roof and four floors. He is knocked unconscious.

Santa wakes again and finds himself on the ground floor of the reindeer's stable. There is a dim red glow around him. He does not know whether he should believe that he is alive. Nothing aches.

Feeling and reason collide. Is he numb because he has no faith, or does love protect him from being hurt by the world? Was the dream real or was that reality only a dream? Santa delays his decisions and crawls toward the small passage that leads outside. His shoulders refuse to fit. Santa eyes the slide leading upwards and knows that he will not be able to crawl up to the next floor. Then he scratches his cheek and tugs on his beard and thinks, "After all, did I not just walk

down stairs using only my fingers? Then what is this but child's play?" Santa attempts to balance himself on his fingers but topples over face down and crashes to the ground. Straw and lichen sticks to his lips and he spits them away with anger. He gets back up, stomps a foot and takes a running jump onto the slide. The force of his weight crashes through the wood and destroys it. Santa looks at the splinters and screams while clenching the air to either side of his ears. "Now what can I do but wait?"

Santa hears a sound above him. The creak suggests that the stable door is being opened, and the stamping hooves suggest that the reindeer are being returned to their home. Santa hears a muffled female voice and hopes that it is Jemima's. The clomping of hooves gets louder and the voice becomes more distinct. On the floor that is his ceiling, Santa hears Jemima say to herself, "Oh, for the old days."

Jemima opens the trapdoor leading down to Rudolph's den and reveals surprise. "What! How did that slide get broken? Rudolph, I thought you left with the Crooks for Australia. How? Have they mistreated you?"

Santa tries to speak but his nose only pulses different colors of red.

"Oh Rudolph," Jemima says, "we're so glad you came back. Although I don't know how." She looks sideways and says, "Guildencrantz, come over here."

"What, honey?"

"See?"

"That is strange. How long's it been?"

"Two Christmases. Santa has been gone as long. Someday we should send a recovery team to the bottom of the ocean to find his skeleton. We lost my beloved Cupid that day too."

Santa looks from side to side in fright, unsure what to do. His bright red nose leads him to the passage. He easily runs through it and breaks down the door leading outside. He hears Jemima's voice screaming as he picks up speed and lifts into the air. As Santa rises and circles in the clear blue sky, he peeks through the sun's glare and sees that the castle really is gone. Only a rectangular pool remains. He resists the urge to risk his life searching for his own body at the bottom of the ocean and instead flies south toward Australia.

Santa's flight is so swift that he does not have to adjust his path to account for the earth's rotation. His nose shows him where to go. He glides faster than sight into King's Cross and inside a hostel. There he finds the Crooks and Xebo living with several other families. They seem happy and content with their communal life. Xebo is the first to notice Rudolph standing in their section and screams, "He's back!"

Goldinox turns and her sweeping red dress follows her golden hair. "Yes, Rudolph is back," she assents. "So, what did you find out about Jemima and Guildencrantz? Have they went completely crazy living by themselves yet? Oh, and did you visit the elves in Ireland? How are they dealing with the incessant fighting there? And sweet Bubsy, how is he doing in the lush jungles of South America? Remember his cute phrase, Paul? 'I fly over that ocean deep to new freedom.' "

"Whatever, he didn't fly anywhere. The monkey stood on Santa's sleigh just like everybody else when they moved them to new homes. So Rudolph, come on, let's see your

Morse code. Blink, Rude, blink....Not your damn moist eyes! That nose of yours. What do you know?"

Santa has a seizure and sinks to the floor with twitching legs and eyelids. His nose blinks rapidly, out of control. The Crooks and Xebo rush over to help him as he passes out.

Jemima pulls Santa's frosty face out of the snow and ice and slaps him awake.

"Santa, Santa, what are you doing? What were you planning to do? We have plans. Everyone wants to leave. I think you should, too. The reindeer and sleigh will transport everybody to where they want to go. The elves are going to their homeland, Ireland, the land of anger, alcohol, and elves, I guess, and Bubsy is getting a special airlift to South America. That's where you found him during a sultry December down there, remember? So get away from this cold water and clean yourself up. No more moping around.

"Maybe you should return to Italy. You always said that you wanted to revisit your almsgiving roots. Back in the days when you didn't have to steal in order to give. So do it. You only get one life. Guildenkrantz and I will stay here with the reindeer for awhile and make sure everything is ready to be left to the whims of time and history. Oh yes, your scientists and other humans will go back home with extra money to keep them quiet. But it doesn't really matter if they tell anyone now. The secret is out. The castle has crumbled and Christmas is left to the humans. Your work is done. Relax, Santa."

"Really, nothing more can be done? This is as good as it gets?" The innocence of Santa distracts Jemima from the fast, cold wind. "No, I will not give up on Christmas. We can't leave

it to the humans. They will misuse it. Always, always, they must have a guide, someone to illuminate the path through the darkness and to provide shadows in front of the divine light that blinds them.” Santa grabs Jemima’s legs and almost bursts.

“Oh, Santa, you idealist. I love thee. Go on and say goodbye to the elves. Unlike you, they do not get 1700 years to realize their dreams, so give them your leave to pursue their dreams in the world. Do not dictate, or I will retaliate.”

Santa is heartbroken but accepts Jemima’s words. He has difficulty knowing what to believe after traveling through a medley of dreams and nightmares, a different body, and a future time. Santa resigns himself to be led for now, with the hope that he will recover his omniscience and understanding of the world. Jemima begins walking toward the stable with Cupid behind her and waves for Santa to follow. “Santa, get thee to a bungalow. Go!”

“Yes, Jemima,” and Santa trudges with a snowy expression toward the bungalow. Inside, Candy approaches him and hands him a book. “Here, Santa, read this when you have the chance.”

“Well,” Cain says to John Gilt, “I guess it’s about time for you to return to the U.S. and make some money, huh?”

“Yes, I think my experiences at Santa’s candy cane castle give me ample material for writings that will fill my house with royalties.”

“You will be a king.”

“Perhaps, but I hope not to misuse my power.”

"No, you are too wise for that. As long as La Rosita doesn't go mad, she will keep you in line."

"And vice versa," says La Rosita. "Right honey?"

Pip interrupts. "Hey, John, what if the humans reject Rosita because of her sharp ears? They may be considered illegal weapons, and therefore, her existence will be illegal in their world. After all, look what happened to Santa's experiment with Monica. The elves hated her because she had soft, round, harmless ears. Doesn't make sense, does it?" Pip notices Santa glaring at him with tender, hurt eyes, and stops. "Um, sorry, Santa. I didn't mean all that about blaming you for the stuff and the stuff with the doctor and the Northern Lights and...um, pointy ears are superior, for real. They are the stuff dreams are made of. Pointy ears are to be bowed down to. Look, I humbly supplicate myself now, sir." Santa kicks Pip in the face with a heavy black boot as the latter bows before him. Pip's nose bleeds and he covers it with one hand. He raises his other hand upward and cries, really cries, with tears, "Walla doogies!" Everyone laughs and Santa feels ashamed for having lost his temper for such a trivial matter.

Santa doesn't know what he's going to do next. He forgets about Jemima. The dream showed him what will happen between her and Guildencrantz, although he does believe that he and Rudolph will remain enclosed in separate bodies. The elves forgive Santa and crowd around him, Eve and Babel wrap against his beefy legs, and everyone shouts and screams. It almost seems like a time distortion festival. Chalucka and Migmulaka are play-fighting with Sad Ida. Murtaugh looks forward to joining the resistance in Ireland. Everyone looks forward to a mind

expansion as they step from the lonely top of the earth into the real world. Questions that they never knew of will become puzzles to play with.

Christmas will surround them now. No longer is it limited to one area. Santa began it, but he can sit back and watch what happens now. His omniscience can take naps and concentrate on smaller things. This will work wonders, for he always had trouble avoiding all the mind-rending things going on in the world.

It looks like a new beginning as Santa opens the book *You*, stares deep into the eyes on its first page, and sees what is hidden behind them. "Ahem, elves, human, and monkey," he says as quietly as he can without being drowned out by the screaming, "I want you to know that I appreciate all that has happened. It is much better that we go into the world and quit hiding out.

Let us share and not hoard Christmas as if we own it. It is for the use of all. Those who do not want it do not need to believe in it. But for those who do believe, I want them to know that I will believe in them. Let's melt, evaporate, and rain onto the world, flooding it with both light and darkness. Otherwise it will become boring and dry. Let's leave this land where light and darkness do not work together. Goodbye, Northern Lights, we wave to you now from afar."

The elves let Santa's words become pieces of puzzles to play with as he turns the page of the book and sees that there is nothing on the other side but the blank back cover. Santa flips back to the mirror and stares at it again. "Ah, I see. This page is complex. It will take a long time to figure it all out. Monk, will you read this to me sometime?"

"Santa," Eve whines, "I want to read it to you, too."

"Yeah, so do I," Babel says.

Soon an entire chorus parrots the appeal. "Well," Santa thinks, "at least if they're going to follow something, it might as well be the pursuit of the meaning of this mirror.

"I'll tell you what," says Santa, "down in Ireland, during cozy, comfortable evenings—perhaps it is lightly raining and thundering, and candles are burning because the electricity has gone out—we will sit around and take turns reading this book to everyone, communicating everything that we see in those eyes staring back at us. If any elves are blind, we will look over their shoulders and read it for them. What could be a better way for us to understand what we should do in the world than to understand ourselves? Yes?"

The elves try to pick Santa up and pass him over the crowd from one set of upraised hands to another, but his weight denies the possibility. Santa spins in a circle and yells, "Walla, elves!" Hyarhas abound.

Jemima comes in with Guildencrantz, unaware of what has been happening, and says, "Santa, what do you do when you see two conflicting realities at once?"

Pip laughs: "Hyarha."

"Yes, that's right, Pip. You laugh when you see two conflicting realities at once. To tell you more than this would only be a serious joke. Analyzing laughs kills them."

Pip elaborates: "We laugh when we see, hear, touch, taste, smell, think, or feel two *or more* conflicting realities at once."

Jemima asserts her authority. "You, Pip, are what some people would call a wag. Now get out of here, dog."

The elves do not laugh. Jemima turns to Guildencrantz and says, "Some people think that everything, even fruitful words, are ripe for a joke. I should spank them for it."

Guildencrantz mumbles his agreement and is then addressed by Santa.

"Excuse me, Guild, but I just thought about how we're all like you. We have been sent for, to travel on some unknown adventure. To what end? We do not know. That is why the study of this book will be so important: *You*."

"What?" asks Guild.

"*You. You.* Don't you see? It's the name of the book. I thought you knew. See, this book right here, with a mirror inside as its only page."

"I don't know about that. It seems kind of wasteful. Why waste your precious time in a book, or a mirror, for Santa's sake—excuse the expression—if it's only giving you a reflection of yourself, nothing more? You can live without looking at yourself."

"Yes, yes, but Guild, reflections are important, because they appear from different perspectives. Putting those perspectives together gives us better knowledge of ourselves, and thus, we know better what we want to accomplish in life, rather than rushing through it blindly, pursuing trifles that leave us empty at the end. And the end is only a new beginning. You don't want to begin again with nothing, do you? Then escape from this circular existence by realizing what you truly want and need if you were to begin again in a new life with nothing but your experience. Look for what will prepare you to endure the worst or enjoy the best. I believe that I have just escaped the vicious cycle. Now I no longer need to be believed in to feel alive. I will

believe and help others to love existence. Look deep within those steaming eyes and you will find more than a reflection—you will approach your eternal essence.”

Guild responds, “That’s crazy. What, am I an instrument to be played by the fat fingers of a man with a mirror? I will not live an illusion. This snow that I see outside is reality, this Jemima I see here is the sweetness that I have been sent for.”

“Guild, that’s enough,” says Jemima, “let’s go.”

“Yes, you lead, and I will be your shadow, or your mind’s reflection, if you prefer.”

“Don’t get clever, Guildy.” Jemima turns and says, “Goodbye, Santa, everyone. I will reflect on you in my memory.” And then the wind spreads snow through the air, covering the two as they walk away.

Gilberto says, “Hey Santa, that was kind of a sad ending, wasn’t it?”

“No, Gil, because it is a true ending. There is no new beginning to be had there.

Between us and them, it is simply over. Goodbye, without joy or melancholy. Now, as for us, we will continue on, hoping to improve ourselves. I wonder where they’re going, anyway? I guess they’re just waiting for all of us to leave so they can move in here, but it will take a few trips to get everybody down to Ireland, Bubsy to the Amazon, and for John G. and La Rosita, the U.S.

“Pack everything you can, elves. I’ll take a few of you now and come back for the rest later. This is an ending, but also a new beginning. I hope that we will all meet again and enjoy Ireland together, and perhaps use our time distortion to tame the wild war being waged. There will be plenty of pubs there, but maybe we should all quit drinking.”

A voice interrupts Santa's speech. "Oh, hello, Santa."

"Hey, how are you doing, China? Is that a letter for me?"

"It's a message from Dr. Zhi. He said to read it out loud to all of the elves. It looks like they're all gathered here, so go ahead."

"All right, China. Here it goes: 'Santa, this message is to be read to every elf. I must let them know that, although you requested me to secretly impregnate the female elves with your seed and sterilize the male elves, I never complied with your plan. The elf children are the offspring of the parents they live with. As to why elves have the ability to distort time, that is inherited from their ancestors who lived when you had elf wives and concubines. But why do elves not show any signs of omniscience? I blame that on education. You may want to try some experiments in that area, doctor. Regards, Dr. Zhi.' "

"Very good, Santa," says China. "Dr. Zhi also told me to inform you that he and the other scientists will leave in your airplane as soon as they clear a runway through the snow. I will go with them. Until we meet again, goodbye everyone."

"Goodbye, China," the chorus screams, and then she is gone.

Santa jumps right into another speech. "We must recognize the good and evil that we have committed and unwrap the guilt from our bodies as we begin a new journey. Forgive me and I shall forgive you."

The elves confess to each other and Santa clears his name of the wrath he was known for in his younger days.

"Now we move together as equals. I am not above you. I am one of you. Let's go. Does anyone have a 'Hyarha' to add, or is reality quite unified at this time?"

"We do not feel like laughing," says Monk, "because this is a serious but hopeful time, as we look toward a clear future with minds eager to be kindled by the sparks of the unknown world we are leaping into."

John McGobber notes that Monk is quite eloquent with his words and Gilberto makes sure that everyone realizes he does not think himself above the others: "Although I was a manager, free from the rigors of time distortion, I am now just like everyone else. I am ready to explore the puzzles of the world."

Monk wishes to call him a liar, but he can find nothing in Gilberto's words to attack. So he relaxes and smiles.

The winds outside begin to sound like howling music. Smiles begin and then some think of the future. Thoughts of the future tickle their brains—mighty yes—so fervently that laughs begin. "Hyarha, hyarha, hyarha!" They are not laughs. Now they are cheers. Everyone jumps and dances, claps and whistles, and the castle at the bottom of the ocean is explored by a fish that has acquired sonar abilities by eating a dead bat, the Crooks and Xebo sit on a golden beach along the coast of Australia and stare beyond the shimmering blue sea, Truck and Trucker explore the mountains of Peru while the jabberwock crouches in caves and hides in swamps, and Bubsy swings from tree to tree along the Amazon. Dreams are slowly becoming real.

Santa says, "Now." And they go, laughing through the sky.

Artistic Questioning

Santa explores truth, feelings, faith, knowledge, tradition, rebellion, imprisonment, escape, leading, following, poisons, and cures. Unlike a philosophical treatise, the novel allows one to explore ideas by giving them material form and following particular possibilities. Rather than concentrating on the extracted generalities that compose the body of science, certain situations are brought to life in accord with abstract ideas. The greatest advantage is that a novel is not expected to provide answers, whereas a philosopher usually must take a firm stance on the issues involved or lose credibility. A novel allows many perspectives to be expressed throughout without fear of the authority contradicting itself.

The novel is a visceral exploration of what art can teach us about living. There probably is not one answer for each situation. Simply entertaining people may be the target in some art, but in *Santa* there are soliloquys that desire to inspire questions. Humans, and perhaps some animals, question the world and their answers are shown through their actions. While thinking, it is not clear that any solution to a problem has been found. But when an action is taken, that is a solution, whether it is effective or not. Whatever thinkers believe at a certain time directs their actions. Yet there is always a possibility that beliefs may be proven or felt wrong later. That is why dogmatism limits, and that is why walking through the world in wonder, like a question mark, keeps life wide and open.

These ideas are abstract, and these words are only attempts at explaining a world that does not need language. Life can go on without words. In *Santa*, the role of language in the hierarchy of living things is explored. Those who cannot communicate with the royalty of the world in human language are kept oppressed. The monkey, Bubsy, lives in a cage. Then he learns sign language, and suddenly he is an equal, one who acquires guilt and can be forgiven.

Just as Dr. Claus once studied with Dr. Dolittle and "learned that humans and animals can speak the same language, if given the chance", one discovers that not possessing the language of the nobles keeps one oppressed. Conformity to the existing power language is one possibility. Another is to rebel and change the system.

Yet animals—and usually elves too—do not rebel against instinct. Instinct makes one feel that things are as they are, and there is no reason to change what has been handed down. Without thought, the instinct that the elves poison nightly with alcohol, they take action and escape. But it is only a mistake, a result of being chased by escaped prisoners and a bloody monkey. So they do not know what to do once outside. They have realized escape without a plan for what to do with freedom. It is then their responsibility to create the rules of life. But that is too difficult and annoying for most people. It is much easier to join an organization than to start one. Anyway, the divine Northern Lights throw them into the snow. A critic, such as myself, could say that this is a symbol of breaking through the darkness of tradition and being dazed by the effort required to create one's own path of light through the unknown night. The elves might be interested in Existentialism at this juncture. Now, to take this further, as a critic might do, we can remind ourselves that Santa instilled this psychological fear of the Lights during the elves' early childhood. If left to fend for themselves, they will curl up and wait for the regal ones to save them.

Aha, now we see that it was not mere entertainment that Brian Caroline was aiming at here. He was also targeting the political system. It suggests to thinkers that there must be a political system and people to secure that system—all of that difficult thinking and interns—and let the rest go about their innocent lives.

And what about the languages that people use? They are philosophies on the world and

life handed down by those in power, those who invented language and sustained it in written form until the workers demanded either indoctrinating education or the role-reversal of rebellion.

To acquire language is to inherit an expansive, but still limited, perspective on everything.

Language limits how one may look at life and puts instinct on trial. Feelings fall in importance as knowledge is created with the reasonableness of language. Then, with books, the elves could find out the truth. But entertainment is the main aim of books. Not awakening. We all know what sells. That which tames thought, mildly poisons it, not that which pricks it with a curing needle, forcing it to awake and question just what the hell is going on around earth.

Overall, the story of *Santa* is confusing. No, not the plot. The elves escape and come back and everybody is happy at the end, it appears. They do laugh, after all. Not likely, but fiction is a serious joke, a grand, extended lie. No, what is confusing are the implications in the story, and the drawn-out philosophy that characters, with one hand on the noose, burst the pages with. When they yell and scream in black ink, the ultimate conflict, the "Tragic Sense of Life" that Unamuno speaks of, takes precedence. Everything that appears in *Santa* is only a delay or a veil over its essence, which is life's essence—the conflict between feelings and reason, faith and knowledge. *Santa*: the stumbling of belief. It is all a mask, but it is fun to look at, and it can be imitated. Ink can be converted into life. Without hungry living eyes to devour its frequencies and translate it into thought and action, language is dead.

This may not be an artistic statement, if that means that the artist explains what a story means, but it explores the role of critics in confusing what is conscious and subconscious in an artist's work and, most importantly, why one should bother with art at all. There are issues dealt with in *Santa*, but they are only various offspring of the ultimate question, Why? If art inspires nothing, no seeking, no creating in its audience, no life, then bury it in a fiery grave.

Why follow when all can lead, curing ourselves and others rather than spewing poison?

Reason, truth, knowledge, and generalities seek converts to a system. Feeling and faith seek something called life, vague, active, particular, with unique meaning and a desire to share the cure. Consciousness needs to cure itself. The instinct of death waits for us to return. Until then, we struggle on, looking, leading, bleeding our hearts of love and other demons, mutually possessing and exorcising all that think and feel, living beyond and lifting inherited veils.