



ANOTHER CHRISTMAS STORY



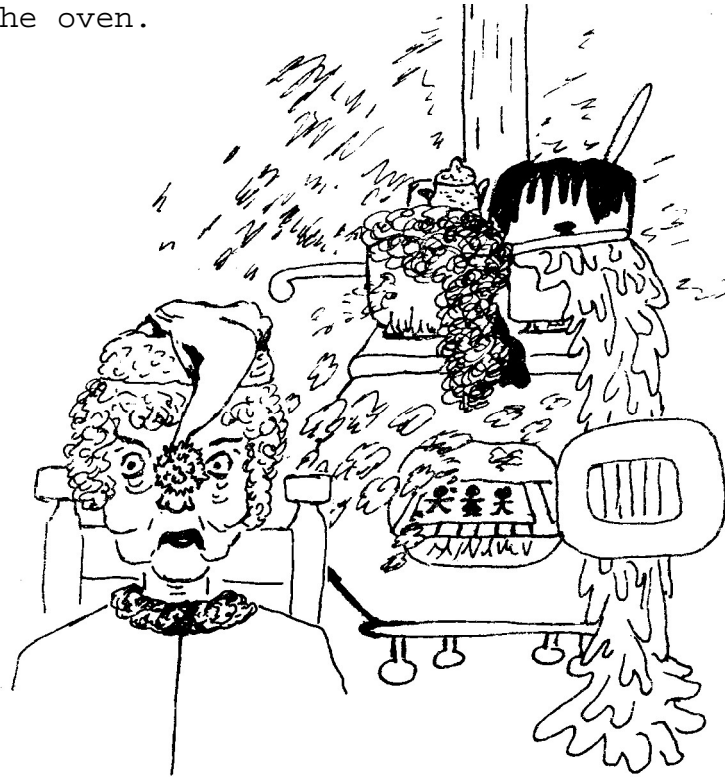
BY

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Rudolph was the first to succumb. Clyde Elf, coming out to fit Rudolph with a holly garland seven days before Christmas Eve, discovered the celebrated reindeer staring cross-eyed, while his nose blinked on and off. Only the day before Rudolph had been dancing and prancing merrily. Now, when Clyde tried to find out what was wrong, Rudolph only mumbled. Exhortations to duty only produced three intelligible syllables: "I don't care."

Mrs. Claus was the next to go. Later that same day, Santa discovered her rocking back and forth in the kitchen, Christmas fudge boiling over on the stove, red and white ribbons spewing from the candy-cane maker, and gingerbread boys and girls charring in the oven.



"Get hold of yourself, woman!" cried St. Nick. "The kitchen looks like the set for a disaster movie."

A muttered "So what?" was her reply.

"Christmas is only a week away. We must have stocking stuffers! What will the children do without cookies, marzipan and sugarplums to dance in their heads?"

"Let 'em eat cake," she intoned, her chair creaking incessantly.

The other reindeer fell one by one. Blitzen looked blitzed, Dancer dazed, Donner daunted, Comet comatose, Prancer paralyzed, and Vixen vexed. Then the elves evinced signs of stupor. Workbenches that once reverberated with the clink of hammers and the zip of saws were now silent. All over the North Pole, all that could be heard were monotonous murmurs of "I don't care" ... "Who cares anymore?" ... "So what?" ... and an occasional, "Tell it to the Marines."

By the next day, only Santa and Clyde remained unaffected. Both scurried around, trying vainly to incite excitement. By the end of the day, Clyde noticed Santa fading. In the midst of a trial run down the chimney, Santa stopped in the middle of his "Ho, ho, ho," gasped "Why bother?" -- and hung limply, his head nodding above the roof and feet dangling through the flue.

Clyde, apparently immune, called Dr. Freudinella Jung.

"Classic case of an 'apathia sowhata' epidemic," she advised. "Or, in layman's terms, the 'I Don't Care' disease. Some say it's a delayed reaction to the swine flu vaccine, others to an overexposure to Jimmy Carter's teeth. Personally I believe it's

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the inevitable result of three months without The New York Times."

"What can I do?" asked Clyde. "The situation is desperate."

"I'm afraid the only solution is to wait it out."

"But Christmas is this week!"

"I'm sorry, but there is no cure."

Frantic, Clyde made a call to Christmas Monsterland.

"PM!" he yelled. (You may remember PM from a couple of years ago. If not, her biography is available on request.) "The North Pole is in shambles. We have a fourth-down situation here, and I don't know how to punt!"

PM teletransported herself to the North Pole in a matter of seconds. (She can do this, you see, because this is a fairy tale.) She surveyed the situation, and then climbed on the roof to talk to Santa.

"St. Nick, what's the matter?"

"It's just not worth the effort. All I've heard this year is 'I want, I want.' And the things they want. Nothing just is anymore, everything has to do something. They want dolls that talk back to parents, guns that shoot laser beams, games that plug into TV sets. Talking calculators and computers that play games with other computers. Automatic hotdog warmers, automatic bun warmers, automatic eyelash curlers, and automatic life-size dolls with all the parts. No books. No crayons or paints. No soft animals. They don't want to think, love, or use their imagination. No one cares. And

if I hear that stupid commercial, 'Deck the halls with M & Ms' one more time ..."

"OK, old man. But after all, it is Christmas."

"Commercialized profit-taking, that's all it is. I don't care anymore. Why bother?"

PM descended, and huddled with the dejected Clyde in the living room. "I think drastic action is called for here," PM declared. "I think we'll have to find a replacement."

"But who?"

"Well, I have made a list. You dial."

Clyde reached Tom Turkey and explained the situation.

"I'm sorry, old boy," said Tom. "But I'm still stuffed from Thanksgiving. Can't help you."

PM called the Easter Bunny.

"So nice to hear from you, darling," hopped the voice over the wire. "That was a marvelous pastel you were wearing the last time I saw you. Wish I could be of assistance, but I'm pregnant again and can't take the strain. That Peter is such an animal!"

Clyde and PM kept dialing. Superman's cape was being cleaned; Wonder Woman was at a health spa in Palm Springs,



hiding from the lecherous advances of Larry Leprechaun (who when reached was busy trying to seduce Bat Girl); the Great Pumpkin was playing squash; Valentine Cupid was recovering from a sordid love affair and wouldn't come to the phone when located at the Playboy Club; and Uncle Sam was perfecting firecrackers that blew out eardrums but left windowpanes intact.

"Doesn't anyone care about Christmas anymore?" moaned Clyde. "Without the elves and reindeer, and the Clauses to chart the course, we're doomed."

"It does look rather bleak," PM admitted. "But let's not despair. We'll think of something."

They thought and thought -- through the third day of the epidemic, the fourth, and the fifth. They exhausted every option, from hiring a marketing man to resell Christmas to the Christmas folk, to considering moving New Year's Day up a week. Then the baby could drop off the presents while delivering the hangovers.

Finally, on Christmas Eve morning, PM arose and announced: "Well, I don't care if they don't care. I care about Christmas. I can try one last thing."

She grabbed cranberries and began to string them. Clyde began to pop and thread popcorn. Both went outside to the old spruce in front of the house and began decking the tree. They added ornaments and tinsel, and played Christmas carols on the old victrola. Finally, the tree was decorated and late Christmas Eve PM climbed to the roof. Santa still hung there, listless.

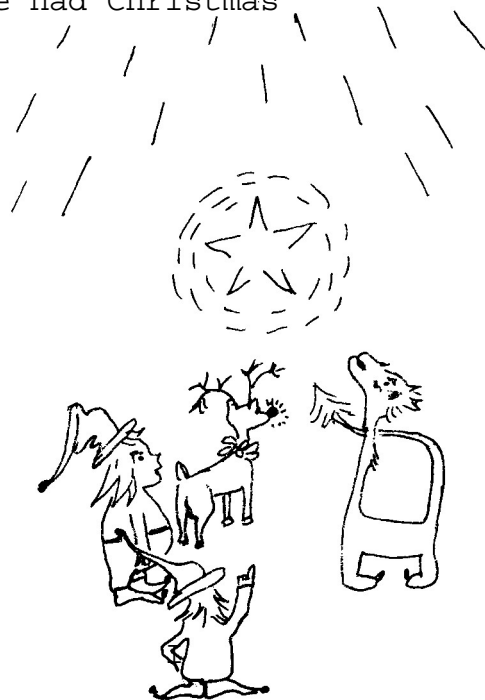
"Santa, dear, where's the star for the tree?"

"Star, what star? What do I care about stars?"

"I've looked all over the house -- we need the one for the top of the tree!"

And as Santa looked bleary-eyed at the decorated evergreen, where Clyde sat perched at its top waiting for the finishing touch, a strange thing happened. A star fell from the sky and rested on the top of the spruce, lighting up the North Pole. The chorus of "O Holy Night" playing on the victrola was joined by a choir of beatific angels. And as the reindeer, elves, and Mr. and Mrs. Claus all came back to life, a deep booming voice echoed from the heights:

"Get your tails moving! There's no way I'm going to let tomorrow be the same as every other day. We've had Christmas every year now for almost two millennia, and although I sympathize with your frustrations, I worked rather hard on this and I like the tradition. I happen to love watching children's faces on Christmas morning, all smiles and temporary innocence. I like seeing families get together, sometimes the only day they can each year. And I like seeing friends share what they have.



If you think things are bad, change 'em -- but don't give up. If I can put up with their shenanigans, you can. Besides, you all know what can happen if I get angry. Now heigh ho, Rudolph! Up, up and away!"

PM and Clyde looked at one another, and then at Santa and Mrs. Santa. And Clyde whispered reverently, "It's a miracle!"

"Yes," sighed PM. "I guess that's what everyone seemed to forget. Basically Christmas is the miracle of loving and giving which overcomes the merchandising and the media."

* * *



MERRY CHRISTMAS

AND

A GLORIOUS NEW YEAR!