

First Place Non-Commercial

Port Hawkesbury, December of 2015. 6:30 pm.

They came as a late entry. In a dented black truck, with flared fenders in the rear to allow for more wheels and heavy cargo. A large gray cattle trailer rattled in tow as they made their way into the parking lot entrance I was assigned to. My first thought was the driver had taken a wrong turn.

He rumbled to a stop beside me and turned the vehicle off. Caked road salt from highway driving ran along the truck's lower parts. A sleigh, with thin metals and weathered wood sat in the truck's dented bed.

The breath of something big in the trailer came out in a cloud, and a heavy movement rumbled and clanged from somewhere within the trailer's darkness.

"We are here for the parade," the driver spoke slowly and without expression while chewing on a toothpick. He was old, by my standards anyway, with a weathered face sporting gray stubble. His gray hair ended near his shoulders and he looked to be the kind of guy unfazed by the bald spot on his head. His heavy jacket, with a large upright wool collar, was unbuttoned to reveal a soiled white tank top underneath. In the passenger seat, silhouetted in the darkness of the cab, sat a child sized person that stared straight ahead while dragging on a cigarette.

I looked at my phone. "We're about to start." This time it was my breath coming out in a cloud. It was the only part of my body that was warm.

He stopped chewing on his toothpick at the thought of being turned away. "We came from- we came from pretty far," he explained without changing his tone. "We'll be quick." He stopped to think for a minute and the small person beside him spoke something I couldn't make out.

I took this time to take a better look at the sleigh on the back. At its front, the narrow runners curved up and inwards in a wide sweeping arc, broadening as they worked toward each other. From this emerged the carved wooden figurehead of a large elf from the waist up. Under the elf's long hair and an even longer beard was an expressionless face. Topping its head was a droopy hat. The elf wore its own carved winter coat with a tall collar, unbuttoned and spread open, not unlike the driver of the truck. Its left arm stretched in front, menacing an axe with a wide curved blade while the right arm clutched a large sack draped over its shoulder.

On the very back of the sleigh, past the edges of the seat on each side, totems rose upwards with carvings of skulls and moons and polar bear heads. At the top of each totem was a baby playing a trumpet, the carvings attached only at a foot, giving the illusion of flight.

Something big inside the cattle trailer clanged about again, taking my attention away from the sleigh. Clouds of additional breathing now came from more vents.

"I could tell you it's for the kids if it makes you feel better," the man said, bringing my scrutiny back to him. A light snow had started, so slowly it was near weightless in the

still air. A flake tickled my nose as it landed and melted. The man looked to the sky and gave a forced smile. "See? It's a sign."

I shivered under my hoodie.

"You, uh, should have a coat," he pointed out.

"I should have a lot of things," I agreed. "Not to mention a bottle of wine and a fitness instructor from Greece that won't decide to find himself when he's thirty." Bitterness can be colder than any weather mother nature unleashes. I reminded myself this guy in front of me wasn't the cause of my problems and I softened a bit. "But who knows. Maybe Santa will remember me this year. As far as the cold, I thought it may be a bit warmer tonight, but the dampness- well, you know the rest."

The man eyeballed me for a minute, then resumed chewing on his toothpick. He shrugged. "Greece, eh?"

"Name?" I asked as I scanned my clipboard with a small flashlight. The entries had mostly been checked off and I wondered if I had made a mistake.

"We, uh, didn't register. This is a, a last-minute thing."

Moses. I looked at my phone again and reminded myself I shouldn't and didn't really care if things were held up a bit. This was a small Christmas parade in a small town, and it wasn't like I was getting paid or anything. Plus, I found the possibility, as unlikely as it may be, of this guy placing in the judging without official registration quite entertaining.

“No promises on waiting for you,” I told him as I suggested he go down to the vacant far corner of the parking lot to get ready before falling in behind the last float of the second row. “I’m not really in charge, so personally I don’t really care if we run a bit late. But I also don’t decide if we delay.” This guy’s attempt to be ready in time would be a hot mess and it was hard to not sympathize with him.

“This isn’t your parade?”

I couldn’t tell if he was joking or serious.

I flashed my clipboard at him. “No. I’m just a person that can read lists. If anyone, it’s Sandra’s parade. She’s the one with the master’s in finance and the job with the town. I’m just a foot soldier.”

The man’s eyes widened, and his head moved back a bit. “There are soldiers here? Under whom?”

“Huh? It’s an expression. I’m not a real soldier. If I was, I would be wearing more than a hoodie.”

“Ahhh.” He took a half glance at the person sitting beside him then nodded to me. “Bad bosses never appreciate good help- or soldiers. Even the ones that can drive. Get that swelling in your neck looked at,” he advised before restarting his truck and moving again.

In a panic, I instinctively felt for my turtleneck and confirmed it was covering the slight swelling I had yet to tell anyone about. I wondered where he had seen it exposed.

He rattled off and as the trailer passed me, I felt the eyes of things I couldn't see staring me down. A monstrous snort and loud bang from inside made me jump.

Waiting behind him was a car that called for my attention and I turned it around once it had dropped off a late participant for the pipe band.

"Five minutes," Sandra spoke over the radio. I asked for a few additional minutes to accommodate our late entry. She expressed her frustration with no committal. At that point I was relieved of my immediate position by a student so I could help facilitate the moving of the entries when the parade got underway.

For the fifth time that year I swore I would never again leave my apartment unprepared for weather and for the fifth time I knew it was probably a lie.

I couldn't see the late entry with the cattle trailer from my new position but had my doubts he was ready when the start time came. Sandra walked by in a final sweep and was unsympathetic. "They knew when this started. There are reasons we set times. And at worst, they can jump in at the back." Merry Christmas.

The pipe band had stopped their warmup and now stood at the ready. I could only imagine how cold it was with their plaid kilts. Their white socks were thick but only went so high.

Given the go-ahead from Sandra, the police escort turned on his emergency lights. The entire area radiated in an alternating blue and red aura as the officer started the lead at a pace slow enough for walkers. Unlike myself, and the pipe band by default, everybody else had come prepared and I swore they looked almost smug, grinning at us with their mittens and toques and warm jackets. The parade was half-way out of the parking lot

when a semi pulling a float depicting the second nativity scene of the evening came to a sudden stop with a screech and a blast from air brakes.

Over the rumble of its engine, I heard metal scraping with an odd yell. From around the other side of the semi came the man, my late entry, in his sleigh. Seven reindeer, paired up except for the one in front, were dragging the sleigh across the wet asphalt. Sparks shot out as the metal runners grinded against parts of dry pavement. I didn't know how, but our guy had gotten situated with enough time to still be part of all this. And in the spot I had assigned.

The reindeer had fiery eyes and were the size of horses. They struggled more to work together than they did to pull their load. Ambling along, they nipped and bit at each other, spitting and snorting as they fought to prove their worthiness to be there. All had dark scars on their bodies and heads, and two had serious limps. Their antlers, covered in felt, were long and thick and reminded me of mangled hardwood limbs I'd seen in the forest.

The thick leather harnesses they wore had etched elven faces and symbols I didn't recognize. Keeping each side of the harness rigid was a curved piece of wood with a large brass ball on top. I later came to know these were called yokes. Meant to keep the reindeer apart, they strained against the opposing forces.

The man, leaning forward on his sleigh, was too preoccupied with his reins to acknowledge anything else.

The child beside him, who I now saw had the face of a man, wore a monocle as he looked back and forth throughout the groups of people. By his feet sat a large sack.

The once stoic face of the elfin figurehead at the sleigh's front now sported an open mouth grin. The figurehead's own carved sack, earlier hanging over its back, was missing.

The piping band took in the spectacle, then looked at each other. They shrugged then started playing, cutting line in front of the semi and falling in behind the man with the sleigh.

"Who the hell is THAT in the sleigh? Is that even legal?" Sandra asked over the radio as the rest of the parade followed suit.

"Late entry, non-commercial, and I'm not even sure," I answered as I shut my own radio off. I went over to another couple of helpers to return my equipment and see where they had gotten their hot chocolate. One of them still had their radio on, and twenty minutes after the last parade entrant had left the parking lot we overheard the rumblings of a commotion along the route. It took a few minutes to learn what was going on, but through stressed communications and later gossip we came to learn a participant- my man with his passenger and reindeer- had come to a dead stop in front of a convenience store to go in and buy two peperoni sticks.

The pipe band behind him had been uncertain what to do and after looking at each other continued to play in position until the man walked out. He reportedly then walked over to them and asked if they knew the song The Gael. Most of them did, but there was already a song list assembled and approved. Not to mention The Gael was a pretty sad song to play in a Christmas parade. They promised, however, to give it a hook in the final stretch re-entering the parking lot. Pleased, the man had climbed back in his sleigh, and

after handing one of the pepperoni sticks to his companion, commanded the reindeer to continue.

The man's sleigh had stopped three more times during the parade, but for short duration, each time at the request of his companion. Seeing a specific person through his monocle, he nimbly jumped out of the sleigh each time to hand a box to each of the three people- two children, one adult. I have yet to find out what was in the boxes.

The rest of the parade went relatively smoothly, and I had decided to hang around to witness these guys dismantle everything for travel. By the time the procession re-entered the parking lot on the other side, the pipe band had fulfilled their promise and was playing the Gael as per requested. I felt a selfish contentment to see that at that point most of the parade's participants were just as cold as I was. Regardless of clothing.

As I think back to this last part of the story, I often play The Gael in a quiet backdrop.

As soon as the sleigh's occupants and reindeer had a chance they broke rank and skirted the parking lot's edge towards their truck. An idea came to me and I went back to the urn, shaking it to see if any hot chocolate was left. I salvaged a tray that had carried other drinks and poured two cups, before any of the kids from the floats could drain it dry. The sludge was undoubtedly extra sweet from being at the bottom. But at least it was hot. Well, warm. I carried the cups towards the man and his companion who struggled under a lamppost's light to untether and corral the reindeer into the trailer.

I made it halfway down the parking lot before I came to my senses on how little these guys would want a hot chocolate right now, maybe ever, and they may very possibly

throw the cups back at me. I wheeled around at a lamppost in the middle of the parking lot, and too lazy to find a garbage can, I placed the tray and cups at its base. I then walked further up and out of the parking lot.

I was two blocks away and almost home when I heard a truck ambling up the street behind me. My late entrants. The driver stopped across from me, put his window down and turned the truck off. He spoke to me from where he was, on the opposite lane of the street.

“You were coming down after the parade, then turned.”

“I-I didn’t realize you had noticed me.”

“I didn’t. Otto did.” The man gestured his head not to his partner, but to the wooden figurehead of the elf on the sleigh. It’s face once again lacked emotion and it had resumed carrying the sack over its back.

“Oh. Well, I was just going to offer you both some hot chocolate but realized you likely wouldn’t have any use for it.”

“Ahh. Yeah, we wouldn’t have had any use for that,” the man agreed then took a sip from one of the cups I had abandoned. It was hard to tell with the lighting, but I think he broke a thin smile.

“I have to say- your entry had everyone talking. Not very conventional, but there’s a lot to be said for it. I mean- actual reindeer? And the craftsmanship on the sleigh. Wow. If you gave your info you’ll probably place.”

The man shrugged. "Where is the best place to get a steak on the way out of town?"

"Bubba Ray's on Fifth has the best food, but it's a dive bar and they sometimes don't take kindly to strangers. Safest bet with decent food is Ohara's, down this street to the dead end then take a left for two blocks. Can't miss it."

His passenger, the child with the man's face, leaned forward and examined me with his monocle.

The man spoke to his companion for a moment then asked, "Do you drive?"

It was a strange question but I answered it anyway. "I have my licence but don't have a car."

He nodded to me and reminded me to get my neck looked at before restarting the truck. He was already pulling ahead when I shouted Merry Christmas to him. I doubted he heard me, which was fine because I didn't even like Christmas. Especially the one I was having that year. This time I was ready for the reindeer in the trailer and didn't jump with their inevitable noises as they passed by.

It was four days later, on Christmas Eve when I heard there had been a brawl at Bubba Ray's the night of the parade. Four thugs, all locals, had been busted up by a man in a child's body. The man and his company, a guy with long hair and a bald spot, had left before the police landed. They didn't even pay their tab.

I won't say out loud who I think the man and his passenger may have been that night, but I will say this- I went to sleep Christmas Eve that year, very drunk to an undecorated apartment. I woke up Christmas morning very hungover to a small but fully decorated tree in my living room. Under the tree was a new jacket; it was green fleece and marvelous. Sticking out of its chest pocket was a two week return ticket to Greece. There was no wine under the tree, but I'm sure Greece has a steady supply of both that and personal trainers.

Along with the ticket was a small note, on a card the size one gets with flowers- "Looking for people that can drive and read a List." There was a twelve-digit phone number under it.

Shortly after Christmas I went to my doctor about my neck. Stage one non-Hodgkin lymphoma. We caught it in time and the prognosis is good. Once that's over and done with I think I may call the number.

After Greece of course.