

## Split Down the Middle of the Nose

### *An Over-the-Season Research Essay*

Whose feet patter around the attic above? Is it Santa, here to deliver a Choo-choo and figure skates? A build-your-own-drone kit and Obama, king of care medical journal? No, it is Miley, on her way from the start to the end of an over-the-season essay. Name ten uses of Rudolph's nose, name them on his resumé.

Sally saw her own completed in the middle of the month. Had she her way, Rudolph would stick his nose beneath the oven, cooking stew and confections every holiday gathering. Sherman had prison search lights in mind. The whole class, all done with their lists, demonstrated their intellectual rears in Miley's direction when she recovered from the wumbles, an incident that delayed her own list even longer in favor of a hit list: Override brussels down Lexy's skirt, a bootleg imposter replacing Habakkuk's Ben Stiller lunchbox, glue Naomi's CD collection together, and other petty strikes to balance out the see-saw of retribution.

Duck-calls and gunshots from the TV should have hidden the smaller noises she made as she sought the pivotal tidbits of research. So many boxes, yet nothing inside could have aided her essay. She looked around at what a mess she had made of it all. A mess upon mess to hide the mess. Grandma should be removing her Christmas sauce from the oven, so she had to tread lightly.

"Listen to them, all carefree and abliss this end-of-year season. And I down to the bone over a cockamamie school paper. I don't care if the whole block blows to Kansas, I will prevail in my endeavors!"

An old mottled head bloomed through the transverse door. "The chuggle-pot down the hall, dear girl. Don't want to wake up to raining gugu." Grandpa looked left. He swiveled to the right. His granddaughter somehow was nowhere in sight, so he heaved himself into the room with an old-

fashioned behave-yourself paddle. There was no catching her among this rubble. His senses were all but gone.

Then came a second pair of curious feet, a pair that, combined with her own and Grandpa's, brought up a picture of the attic floor caving into the neighbors below. The gophers would have a messy Christmas for sure. Miley swept from box stack to sky-scraper, glimpsing Grandma waving around a rolling pin. "Come along, Eustace. Do let's relive the good old days." For sure, that would be something to spy on.

Less discretely came Hounder and Ruckus, pinpointing Miley at once. They sardined themselves wherever she stood, thinking she'd blessed a dumping grounds with her presence. Upon making way, she'd make a fresher doodle spot, thus they fought over that.

"Pray, this should be a quieter corridor." Mother superior set foot into the room.

"One, two, three, and squeeel!" The cheerleading squad backflipped into a box of antique dishes.

"The world is set against me! I shall lose my mind, what can I do?"

She seized a snowglobe, one with scars on it, and shook it just as the spectacle of Chuckie Cheese loomed in.

Boxes toppled, making way for an imposing arctic wind. Pom poms took flight like unfaithful toupees. No longer able to simply hold it in, Hounder and Ruckus released their brown inhibitions which spiraled to the tune of a tornado.

Few things afterwards made ready sense. Mother Superior's coif flew off like an albatross, as did Grandma's curlers and grandpa's remaining hairs. After the flight of ornaments, pine needles, puffin feathers, and snowflakes made certain Miley was no longer in her attic, but in the attic of Earth's refrigerator. She should have brought a map, how goosey!

"Now, don't you be a dunce, now," she warned herself. "There are ways to find your way." And with that, she scooped up mouthfuls of snow from a girthy perimeter. She made sure it was fat enough in multiple directions. She wanted a mentor whose travels lay on all ends of the compass.

She made certain to include a mouth, out of which directional wisdom should have poured. Instead, cheap cellar whiskey poured into it, and his usefulness ended with his head on the ground.

"I should have made a teesnowtaller, a snowmaid all along," she realized with a second ball of snow. "Women are less given to the call of the bottle." And with the inclusion of two smaller snowballs, the maid began screaming. Miley didn't get to pick what the snowhag screamed, so directions to Santa's workshop were not among the words to come out. Rather, frantic demands of expensive bosomwear shook the bird's nest from the trees.

"Why, I wouldn't spend a thousand dollars on you!"

The snowmaid's head experienced the force of two aggressors that day; the first was Miley's fist, which launched her into the second, the bucking hoof of a reindeer. Its screams lived on, screams akin to splitting wind as it hurled towards a soccer goal post.

There was much to be said for the selection of songs playing over the workshop loudspeaker, most of which having to do with them sucking. "Don't You Take my Crisis Away" was a lost Presley the public never had the chance to dance to. Santa, Elvis, and Ronald MacDonald had nicked a magic eightball to play nine-pins with. In lieu of actual pins, the boss had "borrowed" his old lady's trophies from the annual Yook-Cooking competition. She never understood them, or even that she'd had anything to do with such a competition in the first place. The whole thing was a way for henpecked husbands to escape their wives' kitchen labor while having a rip-roaring time of it. The worst dishes always went to Judith, so Santa seldom had any use for the trophies.

Santa faced two wars that year, a secret one, and a well-known one. The White House was split between a name on the naughty list and a name on the nice, and the two names belonged to people

who were married. Unappreciative of his position as the world's leading naughty, Trump ordered the construction of a wall between North Polia and the rest of the world, and make Mexico pay for it. The debacle is what inspired the game of "boozed-up bowling," with only the gnarliest beverages to be served between the three men.

Ronald didn't drink. He needed his utmost eyesight to pull off the heist he had in mind. Statistics showed that his number one competitor in the cheap plastic trinket market was the roly-poly home invader himself. He was there to take a good look at the nice list, even though he'd have better luck with a look at the naughty list. There was less competition there.

"A doom draws near!" Sang a half-sobriety Clause, for little is it told that the intoxicating powers of the bottle on the rest of us gives the great gift leaver the power of unplugged ears. Like gnomes in the rain, the three execs exploited the towering paperwork. Ronald at first suspected his aims and ambitions had been sighted, and the alarm was a ghost story spoken to dust off the old man's throne. Sure enough, a battering log bounded again and again, against the mighty office door, built from the very swingsets and pulleys intended for Joey and Suzy.

"Let a wise old woman glimpse her ye rumps, merrymen. Lor' bless, the wisemen be needin' their efficiency raps this youthified h'aur."

Of useful endeavors, there was somehow no proof. The unfinished paperwork added to that. Judith Clause, doughy and determined dame she was, crept into the room with the very tennis racket John McEnroe used to swat stray cats with dur' his blunder years. There was clutter abundant in the Clause closet. Their home-making skills were bent and marketless.

They donated to her all the space they did not occupy, as the slow but sluggy woman opened fire upon rump season, turning this way and that, cornering paperstack maze like the very famous shining.

There then came a fifth and sixth pair of unauthorized pitter-patterers, a pair that answered only to the odor of chicken nugged crust on Ronald's jumper. Vixen could lend her own opportunistic rump to Judith's tennis racket, even if this was her one chance to sample meat.

Ronald cartwheeled from paperwork stack to pine tree. Times three his visage was assaulted with the sight of Judith in her nightgown which she'd many centuries outgrown. Rear-end wrinkles inspired ideas of what to punish his naughty-listers with. Frice, the nemisistic spit thread dripping from vixen's taster. Quince, a pair of elf-shoes uncurled in a sour death-march, for lo, the supelvisor Bernard had stuck his condescending nose into the dealings of the world's leading reward-based tycoons.

Bernard's bells didn't jingle. The employee reports were far from merry. Heads would roll under Bernard's management. Heads would roll within only a minute to spare between the great meeting between Santa's eyeballs and Jack the Ripper the Undelfing's penmanship score.

"I want you-go-down-punch somepunk in the neck!" He waved the clipboard around. "I'm five burst vessels away from a tumor about now!"

Judith hadn't the managerial say-so of her husband, but she was still the second best thing. Head softly on her breast, she told him what: The best cattle-prod for a lazy elf was a waffle grid on the sitter-side of the skin, and once he was all full to the brim, he could redistribute some of that unlazy tonic unto the elves he oversaw. One hour later, with a hand to his butt and a chalk to the tally, Bernard found one gift, one tree, one ornament, and one sugarplum unaccounted for. Let's don't get it mixed up, because considering the coot in charge of glass blowing that day (Gusty of the fabled self-esteem carole), dashed ornaments were not a rarity. They were not precious gems. This one was all-out missing. Visions of elves and reindeer in the unemployment line danced in his head.

"Gather around, elfrybody, gather around."

For it was the hour of the workshop mega-stocking. The annual moment when the size of the Christmas bonus, when they knew just how sizey.

"Ooou! What shall come out? Cash?"

"Roll them figure skates this-a-way!"

"What are you hoping about, Finkledip? Figure skates are for Alex. We're grown up. We want grown up toys."

If Bernard had one of those box-taper rollers, he would have wrapped more than one mouth shut. Wide opened the workshop mega stocking, and as elf and reindeer held hands in anticipation, and don't forget hooves, only one figure spoke up. "What the plum is this?"

"What the plum is that? More like, why the plum is that? In the holiday megastocking, that is, instead of our christmas bonus."

There then passed from ear to ear a conspiratorial rumor. Bernard chased it down with deliberation, hankering to rip from it his authorization, which wasn't granted in the first utterance. The girl now squirming her way out, according to the rumor, was the Christmas bonus. Somebody had needled the boss for a niece or nephew, and now comes a guerilla witchhunt for the selfish elfish nincompoop. Coming from another direction, a second theory thought she already was someone's niece, there to measure the Christmas bonus and report its merit to the sneaky relative. Yet no ruler or scale came out with her. Finally, the last option supposed that Rumpelstiltskin had finally stolen a baby who didn't meet his fancy, so he decided to unleash it on his neighbor, the Krampus's nemesis.

"This is all find and dandy," said Mingmung, "but I only have one question. How are we to spin gold out of this ferocious dilemma?"

"Mmmm. Gold..." fantasized Yumbo. "That would have been a nice, weighty bonus."

"You are all incorrect."

The gossip and yaps ceased under the interjection of Miley.

"For I, and only I, shall recite the truth of the matter."

And thus began the tale of Miley's factory-wide disruption.

Buddy the Elf's scholarly ambitions shared some undercover time with his work schedule. The six-foot third grader booked a flight for the best-seller list on behalf of his tome on yuletide history. He regaled the pages with romance and drama that Miley was eager to dine on, not knowing that it consisted of such drival as Bingle's "pickle prank" and the time Arnie's fountain pen ran out of ink. Miley would just have to learn the hard way.

She believed the best way to enact her espionage was to cram herself in a nearby jack-in-the-box, utilizing a slinky (neck), whipped cream (face), pepperoni (cheeks) and a chewed up wad of red hots to stick between her nostrils to impersonate your average jack. She didn't even know what they looked like, not even the one she ripped out of her current hiding place. She put a bucket on her het lest someone decide to play a game of whack-a-mole inappropriately.

Yanking her strategically placed string, the fire alarm set off from afar. It removed from Buddy's mind the job at hand and replaced it with food-hunger. It was lollipop day, and he took off for the cafeteria.

Miley emerged from the box to snatch the home-made textbook. She hid in a tent, while Fliffer Floo laughed at Buddy's cafeterian fancies. "Silly elf. Don't you remember? The fire alarm out here has few uses: none! Ever since we scared all the Eskimoes away, no one is around to attempt a weenie roast on the workshop roof."

"Ah, how foolish he is. Falling for a trick like that." Miley wanted to give herself a straight-A report card, but these fancies were undermined by the uselessness of "A Chronicle of Contemporary Christmas Crises." Not a single letter of Rudolph's whereabouts had Buddy reported. All that the pages gave her were brainstorming sessions over the slogan for Negal Bluth's "Get-the-kids-outdoors" campaign. All Buddy had done was glitter and sequin the cover.

"And a poppyrumbug this turned out to be!"

She sought its riddance faster than its retrieval and tossed it back to the table it came from. She still wanted to stay out of sight, but she also knew who the dratted thing belonged to.

On to Hermy, who hid teeth among the popcorn in the tensil. He was in charge of decorating the trees. He had to stay true to his elvish nature, but he hid the teeth behind a façade of braces and dental hooks and drills. What a political statement it would all be! What happens to teeth when evicted from their parent mouths? That's what Hermy would like to control.

They hid between the popcorns on the tensil, that's what. No one would know unless Vixen came around to snack on the trees again, as usual.

It didn't take long for the choir director to find some unrelated but cheerless fault in Hermy's performance, and like the bellowing oaf he was, he turned every ounce of his operatic training onto the blonde girly molar smoocher.

Where was Miley in all this? Hidden, even more cleverly than the teeth Hermy loved so much. She stood still within the prickly, pointy, pine tree, listening for the moment when Rudolph's name would invade the conversation. She had to help it along in the form of a subliminal message; she sneezed a sneeze that keenly resembled his name. Hermy and Boss looked around for the odd sound, then continued their argument on unrelated matters.

"Good riddance to them!" scoffed Miley. "They were of no help whatsoever. Hello, what's this now? A charity wherein people pay to smash a random object? How curious."

It was no such thing. Having nicked a metal hook from the tree she impersonated earlier, she now assumed the shape of a life-sized ornament for the trees in the titan dimension. A little ways down the hall, an elf was correcting the shapes of misshapen ornaments with a hammer. He had yet to leave a survivor. He reminded Miley of the good ol' boys in Florida who took pocket knives in places where they wouldn't need them. Former boy scouts.



"Gusty, where are your glasses?" Even Miley recognized this one as Keebler. She had to swallow over and over to stop herself from ordering him to go back to making cookies.

"I took them off for the employee photoshoot. Somebody stole them."

"Aw shame, shame. That's just like when ol' Rudolph had to muddy his nose. Flared the lens right up. Like lookin' through watermelon soup."

Keebler was starting to look a little glass and misshapen, especially around the noggin.

"Howdy cobbler, am I glad I'm not barefoot!" And Keebler took advantage of that, mashing in the shiny little shards with the enthusiasm of a hot coal walker. Gusty must have had some kind of avante-gard masterpiece going on down there on the floor, because he shrieked and spun around on a baseball bat before knocking Keebler to the ground in his daze.

Way to trust silly elves to give her any knowledge of Rudolph's whereabouts that year. What did elves know? She needed to consult the wisdom of Reindeer.

The most important tidbits ordained the trickiest set up of all. The breakroom refrigerator--as a matter of duh, there was no breakroom refrigerator. Instead of it, a cat-flap opened directly outside, where the arctic cold held nice and frozey the delicacies of Clause-corp employee home-cooking. Miley made quick work of a nearby sugar-plum, making the skin of the snack her own personal camouflage. In aid of the eaves, two coffee cups stood on either side of the barrier, linked by a generous length of dental floss.

"So this was what the blonde one used for the tensil line," she noticed. "Now, don't dare wander, and stay you put," instructed Miley to the coffee cup. Such wonders animated the North pole that she shouldn't show surprise should a mere coffee cup come to life and flee.

It was around the hour of lunch, however time passed in the North Pole, that two reindeer crowded the scene. Miley giggled so hard that she spit in one of the bags to keep her coverion. As

the end of year neared, there ought to be math problems surrounding the circumference of a reindeers' rump slope. There were surely a debt of numbers to be found there.

"That Keebler ought to be put in a home," diagnosed Cupid. "His wits are betraying him more than Julius Ceaser."

"Amen," agreed Prancer. "Old age among the elves. Who would have seen that coming?"

"And to think one's sanity was as immortal as the body itself."

The Christmas Beagle made a cameo, and if Miley knew any cusswords, she would have thought them there and then. If anyone would have been there to rat her out, it would have been Sandy Copperfoot, but he was nowhere around. The Christmas Beagle was of that sordid breed of employee who patrols the break room, never investing his efforts anywhere but the chastisement of his workmates. He'd just scooted his tattly tail in to order the two winterland behemoths back to waiting around to be shipped off when their minds rejected the idea of such a sizeless runt possessing any power whatsoever, and instead of a coworker they processed him as a hamburger.

Hard to say much about what happened next, only that the whole ordeal worked them up an appetite. With shifty glances exchanged to one another, they reached into the catflap to inspect the offerings of the elves.

"Okay, surgarcoat, do your work!" Miley thought this with all of her might, and she willed it to escape their notice. Time permitting, she would have sheltered herself with a brown-sack lunch igloo beforehand. Cupid located and selected a goodie bag, the contents of which were vegan. Not even the goodie-two shoes who chose the diet deserved that level of taste torture. The next had a sandwich with penguin meat. A crowded burrito occupied the next bag, and subsequent findings proved equally inedible. Everyting wound up in a small food community upon the floor.

"Ah, us," marveled Prancer. "The previllage of being an animal. Dignity cannot imprison us to the laws of mankind."

"It sure imprisoned Donner's boy."

There it was, the long-awaited conversation that would fill her essay with points (the numerical kind).

Prancer snorted. "Anybody born with a light-bulb for a nose is bound to be swallowed up in his reputation. Tell me, Cubic, was there any other Rudolph besides Rudolph of the light-bright snozzler? What about Rudolph the astronaut? Rudolph the sailor? Rudolph the eskimo? Rudolph the ice-cube server?"

"Listen to you," tears sprayed down Cupid's cheeks. "I cannot imagine a conversation between you and the boy leading to a fate any other than this, the one he now faces, face-to-nose, Ruby red glowing neon nose. Questions of his dimensionality go in two directions, rude and polite, shall they ever meet one another again?"

The two stared at another in silence. Their focus dropped to the forsaken meals on the floor.

"We just moved the breakroom about fifteen bites closer to a famine," observed Prancer.

Cupid shovelled it all through a hole leading to a sunny spot on a California sidewalk. "Quick, we must burn it all to a crisp! Nobody should eat that poison. Reduce suffering in the world, you and I!"

They left whistling like no big deal. Miley wouldn't let them get away with it though. That portal was bound to let sneaky kids in with disruptive intentions. Her next essay would be a letter to the Californian embassy, let them know about that deal.

"I'm different from the naughties," reassured Miley as she tucked herself into the workshop mega-stocking. "I have noble intentions. I'm not exploiting shally portals to peek at presents before Christmas even arrives."

The reaction to her presence in the workshop, though myriad, was in conflict with her ideas about her own intentions. The reindeer wondered if she was edible, yet their moves towards testing any edibility were met with a slap on the nose with a flyswat. The senior elves put curlers in their shoes,

knowing it was natural for them to lose their shape with age. Gusty, still near-sighted, mistook the stocking for junk mail, and soon both stocking and shredder were removed from the room on a stretcher. Bernard warned if there wasn't something done about the problem, he'd draw a name out of a cap and fire him.

A theatre of tiny, motivated fingers ushered Miley aboard the Christmas sleigh. Though still nervous about their employment prospects, they still managed to Carole their way to Golgoran's pawn shop. Golgoran was an old witch with a cold who ran an antique pawn shop. The grab for the Christmas bonus was still as hot as ever. Hopefully, there was a rich barren couple out there longing for a lovely daughter, but considering all of the old witch's laundry lying about the place, her connections were somewhat in doubt.

"What do I look like, the stork?" sneered Golgoran. "I deal in old treasures, not felons."

"Have a heart, old mother," pleaded Niffisny. "And not the greasy black slime one you fished out of the shower drain."

Golgoran inspected Miley, face-on and profile. "Your friends are not normal. And neither are you."

"To the pits with all that, I have an essay to write, and I have only the weenciest of information to go on."

While the witch and the elves argued, Miley inspected the antiques. The old quack kept charms and talismans of all sorts, given up by people who outgrew their superstitions. Otherwise, they saw the magic behind these gongs and medals to hold more power than they were brave enough to possess. The chance that Rudolph might have meddled in something that did him a bad turn was something to look into. She would question the Reindeer when she got the chance. In the mean time, Golgoran and the folk argued still.

Without proof of purchase, Golgoran would go no further in Miley's appraisal. Jip Jip produced a shred of stocking, but she demanded a receipt.

"Look, hag, it's been a hard holiday on all of us here. You think preggies swallow receipt printers on their way to the delivary room? What do you want, a birth certificate?"

"No, I want laundry. Sailing right into your face, hahaha!"

The witch screeched and cackled, throing unwashed bras and panties towards many a disappointed puss.

Halclubber raised his fist and shook it at the sky. "Rudolph, you're the cause of all of this! If you had just done your duty and conformed your over-glorified fanny to work in the shop like the rest of us, we wouldn't be in this mess!"

Miley found herself the object of pursuit. Dashing through the snow led her to seek shelter in a coffin. Rather than waste more energy prying open the lid, the elves stamped the address of the slacker they blamed the most and launched the thing onto the Candy Cane Express.

After about thirty minutes, Miley noticed that there was much less commotion than usual outside. She found her way out of the coffin, but then saw she was now a prisoner to the whims of the mail train.

"So complicated, what it takes to write a mere over-the-season essay." Life was a series of impracticalities. That would have been a great way to start the essay off. For now, she was after what little freedom she could get. She was now passing through the gingerwood forest, where gum drops blossomed from the branches. She grabbed at the lower-hanging produce. Anything she actually caught was soon dropped in an attempt to collect as much as she could. After this failure, she noticed the train hurling through a blizzard. Her outstretched finger couldn't even catch one grain of the sugary frost. A spoon would have done her some good.

In a remote igloo sanctuary, the phone rang. On the other end was Donner, armed with the intellectual equivalent of a pea shooter. The recipient of the call was ambivalent on how much he ought give himself into persuasion, and as such, he alternated between one ear to the other as the lowly old Reindeer badgered and nagged.

At a resounding smash akin to a train running full steam into his door, he let his attention wander away from the debate. The hermit was expecting Italian, though he didn't expect it delivered the German way. What he saw at the door was nothing beyond disappointing. What saw him was quite alarmed.

Miley got thrown off the train and the coffin smashed like firecracker against the igloo. If that was the way they treated their mail, then somebody ought to get fired. She stopped thinking that thought and thought a new one once the igloo door opened, and that was, "What the plum happened to you?" I put that in quotes because she also said it out loud.

Someone else also said that out loud, and that was the classroom plagiarist, Chaz Kinklestrom. Chaz never turned in his homework until he got a look at everyone else's, so that he could compare essays and juice the smartest one. He'd been following Miley all the while until he got a live look at the topic of her essay, then he lost his breadcrumbs and climbed the nearest evergreen so he could throw stale roman biscuits at the out-of-tune carolers until the state park looney catchers show up and drag him away.

Rudolph, you see, had gone on a vision quest. Realizing he'd been getting the raw deal, volunteering his free services to the very people who took a dump on his nose, he wanted to split his soul like Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde, and learn which part of himself sold himself out of his own dignity. All that it resulted in was splitting himself into a two-headed weirdo conjoined at the nose, one head was Polite, and the other quite rude.

"What the plum happened to me? What the plum happened to the fijolli I was supposed to get this afternoon?" snarled Rudolph.

"Say, look at this! Maybe it's one of those foreign specialties that all those spritely young chefs are trying out," cheered Politolph.

What, is 'olph' North Polian for the letter 'E'?

"Let a goody-lister dig through your stockings for once, will ya?" said Miley. "Either that, or I dig through your nose. I'm writing an essay, and I know you're a sucker for giving in to the whims of your tormenters."

Their nose was the one thing either 'Olph shared with the other. Regardless of which side of the manners fence he fell into, sharing, that is, the refusal to, was the one thing he agreed on, so the next thing right in front of her own nose was a steadfast wooden door.

"We saved our nose!" believed Politolph.

"We should have known betreachorous land plankton such as she were always up to nose good."

Hangover Clause had a lot more to prepare for than Santa Clause, starting with a visit to sobriety inn. All Big Foot had to do was wave a Clause family recipe (narwhal casserol) under his nose, and he got a good laught out of the ensuing convulsions. Nope, the nerve tonic was still in the old man's veins as of the great Chickentucky Slope climb.

In training for the climb of Ebenezer Trump's wall, the reindeer woke up one morning surrounded by spacesuits and spelunking ropes. "I'm not going anywhere without an explanation." Blitzen stamped her hoof, and Bernard promptly atjusted a dial to add a litte air pressure in her suit; clamped her yap-trap right up. "There's you're explanation. Into your harnesses, everybody else."

Flight was familiar. Scaling a 180\* slope taught them the actual weight of their fatzenheim employer, combined with that of the world's leading cryptid and a plagiaristic corporate clown.

Ronald MacDonald had hit the jackpot. Hangover wanted the entire weight of the actual journey simulated, so he brought along his stash of toys. Wherever he went, Ronald was right there, hiding in the toy bag and making impressions of all the dolls and action figures in his own cheeseburgers. Let's say a starving Arctic snowfrit were to shoot by. Aimed just right, it'd intercept a falling cheeseburger meant to make it all the way down. A brown paper sack opened to the tasty projectiles, held in place by a stripe-shirted sojourner who cheered "robble-robble!" after each catch. Whether or not he even belonged there was in doubt, but the paper sack definitely did. It was all a part of the plan.

Yet the climb up was a mixture of sweat, tears, grunts, and belly-aches. Less and less did the reindeer care about the material fancies of Jonny and Sally Pharisee.

"Ridicule and torture!" she sobbed, "I never agreed to be an elevator!"

Her answer was a sharp poke in the butt from Comet's prong. She aimed a kick and hit Cupid instead, then blamed it on her haywire reflexes. Nevertheless, the fact of the matter left a web of cracks on Cupid's windshield.

"Are you all done with that sleepwalking business yet?" Cupid turned around. There, on the last harness in his row, Donner used his harness as a swing while using a cell phone. "You're disappointing our family. I hope you're proud of that. Your mother is doing everything she can."

"Dead weight! Heh, hehahaha! That's what you were!"

A plunk in the face woke up Santa; Big Foot had time enough to duck, but the half-ton of wildlife that knocked all the sobriety back into the bearded horn of plenty was on its thousand-foot journey to the ground.

"Fresh justice," cried the sage old man. "I may be weathering the numbing kindness of a dozen friendly bottles, yet I still recall that beasts can find themselves on the naughty list, which you certainly will do, beast."

Cupid farted. It was well worth it.



Meanwhile, the hamburglar saw the falling threat a thousand miles a way. "That's a mighty big mac heading my way. Somebody must have asked for a Subaru." Knowing how much that would be to haul, he decided to call it a day. His shirkery left no one to collect the subsequent burgers Ronald tossed down. What you had left was a bite-sized mountain of incriminating evidence which, though it served to break Donner's fall (not to mention his cell phone), also gave the slacking reindeer the key to unravelling Ronald's masterplot.

"What's all this? Say, I recognize these," he recalled as he peeled the buns apart. "These are the shapes of the items as demanded by the goody-two-shoes of the year. Something sneaky is amiss. I know! I shall expose the mutiner. I will tell Santa of this heinous espionage, and in the process score a promotion in front of dull Cupid!"

He hadn't noticed that burgers had been falling all the while, poached upon his prongs like a weenie roast. This got the attention of reindelinquints, who bucked stones and snowballs aimed at the burgers in the hopes of knocking them off. They missed, and they were sore. "You won't get away with this," they promised. "The naughties shall usurp the lists yet!"

Through out his childhood, Rudolph had never known his own father to fall into cheap theatrics, so when he broke from his tirade of grievances to gasp and moan, he took it as a sign the conversation was over. He never knew how much parental nagging his vision quest would inspire. Nagging, and boredom. He might as well go through with it all; who knew what demeaning names the herd would come up with should he show up divided in the head.

Now, what might complete the split, apart from a buzz saw? He looked around ; only his ruder half entertained thoughts of amputating the other, while they in turn entertained him. Ah, a stocking! His politer half noticed that, and suggested it for the object of a debate. He pulled up an easy chair to face it directly. What was it that qualified the children on the nice list for such a position.

"Fold your laundry, brush your teeth, go recycle twice a day, ride your bike climb up a ladder, plant an oak tree in the ground."

"Nice list privilege."

It was more likely the sing-song way that Politolph suggested the prerequisites to which Rudolph objected than any evidence that butt-rude left half knew about. Either way, mouths closed, followed by their eyes, and the debate resumed within the space between their minds.

They took a sudden break when something wiggled nearby. Peep-eye. But they didn't decamp the workshop to play peek-a-boo wink with the common creaks of the igloo. Politolph gave Rudolph a gentle scolding to remind him to keep his eyes closed. Rudolph gave him a wap with the newspaper.

Do you remember the watches? The ones that told you your list? They would redden if your name was naughty, then greenen if Santa saw you as nice. Yes, the dumpsters were bursting that year. That left the homeless with less of a home.

Speaking of dumpsters, the stocking fell from its hook and spilt Miley onto the floor. "Say grace," she commanded, "Miley is more treat than any Yuletide fruit, than any orange peel or apple core, and that not much to say."

Uh-oh! A clipboard? The slacker's worst enemy.

Miley's home-making sensibilities were assaulted by the state of the place, banana peels on the ground, coffee grounds smeared all over the wall, what was this, a pig sty? For company, Rudolph had built snowmen, dressed them in warm winter cloaks, really got into the spirit, that one.

"This is a house of murder! What was a furnace even doing in a house made of meltables? I rate this house an F, the letter I am definitely not getting on the essay I will write."

"Is the old man senile?" regretted Rudolph. "I expected to get a little more out of him than this. The annual decrement of gift quality is a total bafflement. Even I deserve more than a picky squatter

named after a unit of measurement. Is that the distance of the restraining order everyone filed on you?"

Miley look at the polite half of the reindeer. She turned to the rude.

"After a thorough investigation of the premises, I have come to the decision that you in your duality are too confusing. The only way to solve the conundrum is for one of you to swallow the other. For don't you see? The magic of Christmas is inside all of us. So what's it gonna be, naughty or nice?"

There was once a promotional ad for paragon behavior among the children. It involved the names on either list manifesting themselves into real human heads, then getting into a shouting match with the opposite list. It was discarded due to the competition it stirred from repeat offenders on the naughty list. Some of these felons lived on farms, and they got dry chicken turds in their stockings. As it turned out, many naughty listers were proud of their positions, and, cole or crap, they made great slingshot ammo.

"Back up the chimney with you." He lifted her by the collar and belt loop and submitted her to the chimney whence she came, but the chimney invested the utmost indifference to his effort.

"Um, what are you guys doing?"

The next couple of minutes were an exercise in insanity, as each toss in the direction of the sky yielded the restoration of Miley to the floor. At one point, he enlisted the service of a fan to discourage her return. Apart from a Fabian breeze in her hair, that made very little difference, even though he had it on high. It did not counteract gravity.

"This is the last chance." He took a plunger and made his way to the roof. "Come on out!" He stuck it over the chimney, frantically stabbing and yanking it. Rudolph was doing most of the work, while Politolph fed him encouraging words, except for the ones, "Oh wait wait wait, we're supposed to unclog the pipes from the other end."

"And you waited until we were up here to mention that?"

Meanwhile, move over, Santa! There's a new clause of the saints. Under the generous fingers and shimmering spatula of Ronald MacDonald, first-graders worldwide opened a happy meal under every tree, and a cheap plastic trinket in that. The inaugural cutting of the ribbon commenced the first annual Christmac. Thus it was that the political bloodshed that followed stained Ronald's lily white gloves. No one else's.

Gerald half-expected his macpresent to be some raw chicken nugget goop. Antonio, on the other hand, was overjoyed that his bad grades hadn't halted the arrival of a water pistol. Kenneth thought any 3rd grade collector's novelty was worse than a penalty coal lump, but Pablo was psyched to unwrap an explosives kit while he was in Juvie for sending popcorn kernals down a fat cop's underpants.

Statistics on the morality lists went haywire. Good Deed Blue Ribbon Tammy's package offered dehydrated applesauce. It reminded her of the year vegetable oil broke a man's heart because it tasted worse than beef tallow. "Next, they'll be trying to pass off apple peals as legit low-glutin substitutes for french fries." Glutin was the latest dietary evil.

Who was that at the door? Tammy, her walls soaked with the blue ribbons her years on the nice-list had given birth to, craved a bit of hardcore cheer like a vegan on a beanstalk. It was the first sin that year, answering the door herself when she should have summoned mama. She paid for it, don't worry. What the hoo, worry anyway, because the anthem that year was the Smack Papa rap, "Last to cross the finish line: Mr. Nice Guy," rapped by a gathering of finger-snapping crime carolers.

Tammy used the door to express her opinion of the assortment of noises. She acquainted it with the caroler's faces. She would have gone back to counting her participation trophies when those very carolers weaponized her window. They assaulted her with messages, written in breath fog. "Crimemas reigns supreme!" They pointed to various medals and badges around her room and mimed explosions.

A drop of sweat crept down Tammy's forehead. The outdoor situation organized itself into a recruitment skit, captions exhaled onto the window, and in the unfolding drama, Tammy saw her

future moral ranking, as decided by the latest clause of the saints. "No, I won't have it!" She disrupted the recruitment skit, upsetting its persuasive powers, lending herself to this years naughty lister's collection of goody two-shoe prisoners.

A parlormaid was dangling a chicken nugget over Ronald's maw when a steam boat whistle tripped up her fingers. There the nugget lay wasted on the floor, only to end under the nautical boot of a one-eyed carcinogenic pirate.

"I yheard yeh spoilt them rumbaggers."

"Are you chewing tobacco in my Donald's?"

Ronald stood up and stormed over to inspect this sea captain's chewer. No, that wasn't tobacco, it wasn't even chewing gum. It was spinach.

"I yheard yeh made 'em up a new holid'y. Them's doing Crimemas."

The universe acknowledge at that moment that Ronald hadn't yet received his Christmac gift yet. It therefore gave him a skylight directly over his throneroom chair. He wouldn't get to keep the things that came through it, though. The tomato clad prowler and the reindeer pancakes beneath were property of the universe itself.

"Frump girl!" Ronald screamed at the parlormaid. "Get rid of it!"

The parlormaid grumbled about it not being her job, but she still tried to wedge a shovel under Santa's hinders. "Absurd!" He hoisted himself up and shook his fanny in defiance. "I shall not be the scooper of some burgerpub spinster."

She tried it on the Reinder, but their shape did not alter (lessen) their weight, and they belly-ached so. She packed her bags and moved to Canada. Now, leaving flat discs around was unsafe, as most things of that shape wound up on the menu as emergency items. Luckily, few things unattended in the MacDoniverse ever stayed put. "Robble robble!"

"What are you doing here?" worried Ronald. "I thought it took all week to climb that thing."

"What am I doing here? What are you doing here? Here is the position of the annual 'mas,' where once was Christ at the beginning of it, there now is--"

"Crime yat the beginning," interjected Popeye.

"It's not mas anymore!" Ronald stomped like Rumpelstiltskin. "It's mac! The first annual Christmac!"

"Ahblerneeherneehum," flabbered Santa. "By what right have you violated this sacred season?"

"By what right have you wiggled your hinderhills?"

By the power of Popeye, the two heads knocked together, and throughout either man's delirium, he regained sobriety, consciousness, common sense (whatever you wish to call it) to find himself scaling that very slope meant to train the reindeer.

Ronald's plans were ruined. Instead of Santa jealously spying on him with a pair of binoculars, the two climbed side by side towards what Popeye predicted was a rendezvous with their masculinity.

"A rotten egg in your confounded corn-pipe!" groaned Santa. "It is good sense you should rendezvous with. What sensible man treads any terrain without his steed?"

"The mayn who is a mayn at all."

Popeye the actual man lifted weights and ate a vegan diet on his way up. The slack-jawed fauna all marvelled and lookd comparatively out of shape as he passed them all.

Mrs. Clause came a-creepin' around for someone to taste test her orca fat stew, and her bra flew off in fascination at how much testosterone on display, and immediately understood that it was celery she needed to win the cooking contest. Turnips she needed to sneak into her husband's cuisine. She went straight back to the kitchen, unaware of its under-control by Birdie and the Grimace.

As for the Hamburglar, he was the king of the naughties. His permanent residence on the naughty list led to a shrine in his honor, unto which all the other naughty list supercriminals bowed and

sacrificed fast food by smearing it on the walls. They sang odes to his thievery. The first hymn in their hymnal was the Jerry Lewis version of "Nuttin' for Christmas.

Hearing the chinks of axes against ice, the naughties all squealed in anticipation of their idol. Upon seeing instead the three pillars of paragon behavior, their beedy eyes shined with the glint of mischievous foulty. Behind, the hostages from the nice-list screamed for ransom and rescue, not their own, but of the 50-cent manufactory they'd virtue-signalled for all year long.

"You want this?" Their captors produced the goody goodies' goodies. "Let's see what Santa says."

The ensuing shower of cheap plastic trinkets proved a welcome challenge to Popeye's climb towards top-tier manliness. Fat-acceptance Santa and fast food pusher Ronald, on the other hand, went even slower. Santa recognized the style of violence from felons he had seen in his magic crystal 8-ball.

He turned directly around and stared at Ronald. That ketchup-haired midget! He was the cause of all his troubles.

"You freakish white currie," shouted Santa. "You bequeathed upon this year's naughties that which was destined for the nice! And o look, every nouse is bound up in bondage."

"Sip my fry fat vat, fats!"

It was at this moment that Ronald noticed the protective circumference of Santa's rump. If he could position himself beneath it, then the goody-rain would fall directly onto Santa and not himself. He shimmied his way the the umbrellabutt, wherein the lack of pain-cries made itself known. Santa looked below once again, and at first saw the most abysmal sneakiness, but then, it looked different. It was different. It was the answer to all of his problems.

"Happy meal? Ho ho ha ha happy landing."

He released the rope. Ronald, fearing for his newfound sainthood, scrambled for a direction along the transverse plain towards which he could move, one that had no falling debris, but it was no

use. Like an overjoyed train, Santabum captured his whereabouts and escorted him all the way down to the bottom, where an Earthquake rattled Pickleberry slope.

"Yis the whole of mother nature conspirin' with yeh?" interrogated Popeye to the naughties above. No matter, no woman dared stand in the way of his service. He could take a hit and pack a punch. Pack it up, and deliver it.

He parted the awestruck mob with his nautical armpit odors, manning his way to the goody-listers. "Listen up, yeh underpants. Yeh gunna join the navy or yelse."

"Or else what!"

He took one end of their bonds and yanked it like a lawn mower. "Yeh'll get a thrashin' in the barn."

Freed, they enlisted then and there. He thrashed them anyway because he wasn't sure they weren't raised on corporal punishment. He had to make sure they all knew what it felt like, and they learned it.

"That's what yeh'll get if ye leave yeven one naughty up here."

Not wanting another handshake with the lash, they turned to their former kidnappers, linked arms, and exercised their right to walk forward towards the cliff. The naughties, out of ammo, panicked. They removed boot and sock to throw, and came to a dead end when no one could agree to flying his underwear. They tussled when it came to throwing one another, and soon enough, they were falling too fast to continue arguing.

"Hooray!" celebrated the nice children. "We can now reclaim our positions on the goody list. Let's all give one another warm victory hugs."

"Not so fast!" The last word on Christmas present justice hauled himself over the edge. With no falling objects, the climb was quite uncomplicated. "Where is my rival, you might ask? He is wedged safely between my butt cheeks. Ooh! I'm in agony! Well, at least I shall keep a scrutinous eye on him."



He gave himself a spank. "Now, you sit pretty just there. Don't try any funny business, you won't get far."

He addressed the expecting "goodies."

"Listen here, all of you. This trunk is the perfect penitentiary cell for all of the upper-division naughties. The naughtiest one of all might be tucked there, but innocent you are not.

"Well, my job this year shall be a simple one. Manueer all around, for everyone. Every child has been naughty this year, hello, thank you. Now, you'd better not pout, you'd better not cry, you'd better not shout."

Popeye cracked the whip. "I said all the naughties."

This steamed the fallen angels out their ears. Some plotted to circle around the three and forcing them off the cliff. But then, they were dragged into the cliffside riot the majority of the kids scrambled to inflict each other, falling off in the process, reducing their numbers to a paltry dozen. "I'd have a new addition to my collection of clutter if it wasn't for you!" Some they went back to wanting the salty one-eyed pirate to plummet, declaring him deserving of an entire mine of coal. They didn't get very far in that regard, because he gave them the Spanish uppercut. They weren't just naughty that year, they were meta-naughty.

That wasn't the number of the flying saucer service, and neither was that. An alien abduction seemed to be the only solution left, thought Rudolph as he dismounted his roof. The door was locked as figured, so there was no way to check his phone for sure.

Maybe, by chance, he had left out the phone book out. After all, slovenliness was a talent he often practiced. By exponential chance, perhaps he'd even left it open to the yellow pages. He sharpened his vision, as did his politer half, and rather than any book whatsoever, what he saw was Miley doing the dental floss. She caught sight of the freakish Reindeer. "Foolish rude mutant!" She screamed. "No true vision warrior brings along his cell phone. That's why I smashed it into pieces."

They should have known no phone book or alien Frisbee would come to their rescue. The 'Olphs didn't even read directions all that much. "Hello, excuse me?" interjected Politolph. "Might we acquaint our door with a battering ram?"

Grouchy, Rudolph grunted his agreement. As they walked away, the sincere sound of a family of toots trumpeted from within. There was no time to lose! The igloo was sure to melt.

The cupcake woods was minefielded with a necropolis of 3rd grade snow angels. When he got a closer look at their shapes, he readjusted his perception to think of snow devils instead. "What's going on here?" he thought. "Did Santa make cookie cutters in the shapes of the naughty list champions? What is this, a wanted poster for zeppelines?"

Whatever it was, there was plenty of room for the likes of Miley if she didn't watch her back. The mischief of it all made Politolph giddy. He requested of himself that he hasten his trapse, and the next minute, he was nowhere to be seen.

In every naughty heart was a promise, and that promise was for Santa. A promise to pay right between the butt cheeks for what a lump of dough he was. The naughties crawled from their shapes like zombies. Popeye would pay, too, and so would Ronald. They picked up whatever they could find for renewable ammo, mostly pinecones and acorns.

"Whate'er happ'd to those other great minds, and the wisdom within, the one with the diet and the one with the diet of shame?"

Santa laughed merrily. "I shall answer you, lady of fathomless wifhood. I shall first tell you where the second is, and then I shall tell you where the first is. When I have located both whereabouts, I shall answer no more, for you have the information you seek. The one is just outside the window, and the other can be found on the naughty list." Santa laughed merrily. Laugh, he did.

"Oh, lists. A list for all natures. Do tell, eld man, be there a lazy list?"

The query yanked Santa from a journey towards sleep, for the question was one which Judith answered herself as she snuck beneath the sofa cushions her trusty spatula and went after Santa's whoopi. "That there be. Ye be on it."

It was decided among the naughties that the ammo just wasn't enough to overthrow so much as a squirrel. In lieu of the revolt, they carved a tombstone on Santa's front porch. "Here lies the nice list, and everything that made us a part of it. The Ring-leader's eyes might have been the ones to appear at Santa's window a second ago, but he left a spinach leaf and an empty ketchup packet to cover his tracks.

By now, Miley had grown quite accustomed to Rudolph's arm chair, almost as though it had been built with her occupying the soul of the carpenter. She looked in favor upon her essay, complete but for one sentence. "In conclusion, Rudolph's nose has one true purpose, to bring us all together at the fireplace after a hot mug of cocoa."

But the words gave birth to a curse. Upon her cheek fell a drop of water. Did she cry over her own essay?

A whole splash of water fell upon her head, and gone was all the excitement and adventure of the North pole. The school yard? Yup, it was definitely all gone. The teacher? Well, unless you find thrills in demands for your homework, which she snatched without question.

"It can't be, it simply can't!" Miley ran this way and that way, neither one leading to a place of resolution. "Where are all the Saints whose ranks Ronald tried to infiltrate? Where are the naughty list residents?"

"One of them is right there." A child pointed at Miley, and his mother rushed to shelter him from her lunacy. She wouldn't be taking him to MacDonald's anytime soon, either. She saw the effect it had on minors.

"A happy meal under ever tree," declared Miley. "A snow bimbo exposed to the cold!"

"Welp, that's exactly what I'm looking at."

A basketball player was about to sprinkle dry snot over her head, bring her back to reality. She didn't stick around long enough for him to finish, she had to check one more thing.

At the peak of the highest hill in the neighborhood, she hoped to catch some glimpse of the rest of the story. Nothing. Not a single beam of light offered to conclude Rudolph's vision quest. No closure at all. Still, she knew what her next essay would be. Equipped with a pen and a notepad, she wrote the heading, "The people who didn't get what they wanted this year."