

Santa Claus and stepdaughter Wendy strive to remake the world in compassion and generosity, preventing one child's fated suicide by winning over his worst tormentors, then attempting, with the Easter Bunny's help, to eradicate homophobia worldwide in one magical night.

Santa Claus Conquers the Homophobes

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**SANTA CLAUS
CONQUERS
THE HOMOPHOBES**

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**SANTA CLAUS
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THE HOMOPHOBES**

Robert Devereaux

PART ONE

Saving Jamie Stratton

Chapter 1. Immortals Out of Balance

IT HAD BEEN the best Christmas ever.

Never had his deliveries gone with greater efficiency, in hovel and manse, by modest sprig or beneath towering Douglas fir. His reindeer, never flagging, sprang straight into the air, every takeoff smooth and belly-tickling, every landing soft and on point. And in each house, the living room air was infused with parental love—at times begrudgingly bestowed, grown-ups being what they were—for the children.

Headed home at last, Santa sat high in his sleigh and cracked his whip over the glistening backs of his reindeer. Form's sake only, those whipsmacks, for his team longed for home as much as he did, eager to be led to their stalls for a brisk rubdown, a well-deserved meal of aspen shoots, willow buds, and berries, and a long regenerative rest.

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“Look lively there, Comet, Cupid,” called Santa, casting a kind eye upon them. “Well lit, my lad, well lit,” said he to his lead reindeer. Lucifer’s tail flicked proudly, the branchwork of his antlers glowing lightning-white in all directions.

As they neared the North Pole, stepdaughter Wendy’s sleigh emerged from a cloudbank on the right. Spirited Galatea of the milk-white fur and beacon-green nose pounded her hooves against the darkness, bringing Wendy even with Santa as they glided in swift tandem through the gathering dawn.

“Morning, sweetheart,” said Santa, his loving words carrying effortlessly to her ears. “How did the visits go?”

Wendy hesitated.

Then her face brightened.

“They were wonderful,” she said. “The kids woke, as always, a little disoriented and confused. But they quickly came around and hopped on board to join me in flight, asking question after question as Galatea drew us on. Each had at least one talent; several, scads of them. But all were delighted at what I showed them of their future triumphs. One little girl, Bethany Zander from North Spokane, clapped her hands and said, ‘That’s me all right, that’s me all over.’ She’ll be a gifted physicist.”

Santa’s bold round laugh boomed out. “Bethany’s pure gold. She’s got extra stars beside her name on my niceness list.”

Thus did Wendy unfold the highlights of her hundred visits to good little boys and girls, her words dancing over the crisp jingle of sleighbells.

Ahead, Santa spied the protective bubble that enclosed their community in the mildest of winters. “Thar she blows, darlin’. Home, sweet home. Magic time, off with you.” Santa’s gesture brought them out of the expandable time that allows millions of visits in a single night, a time used as well by the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny, and the Sandman.

Fierce floods of snow flew scattershot against his team.

Galatea lowered her antlers into the storm, her nose’s powerful gleam transforming the flurries into a mad scatter of emeralds.

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When they pierced the protective bubble, the snow turned at once random and feathery. Wendy pointed ahead in wonder. "Look, Daddy. We're almost home!"

Their runners brushed the treetops, raising mist-clouds of snow dust behind them as they flew. A swirl of dark dots in the commons resolved into individual elves. Over the mica sheen of the skating pond Santa and Wendy passed, then over the elves' quarters, the periwinkle-blue stables, and the workshop's fire-engine red, swiftly eclipsed by the gingerbread house and the cottage where Santa and his family made their home.

Rachel and Anya waved excitedly from the porch.

Santa felt such love for them, Anya his mate since their mortal days in Myra, Rachel only newly come into their lives. Though he took much joy in his annual trip around the globe, to be parted so long from his beloved helpmates tempered that joy.

Santa yielded the lead to Wendy, coming in. One final sweep above his helpers, their shouts rising in fountains of elfin delight, and the runners swept down to kiss the snow and bring them to a smooth stop.

Swarming in, the elves lifted him and Wendy on a surge of hands. Thrice about they carried them, high above their heads, then wrestled them good-naturedly to the ground and at last brushed them off and delivered them to the fond embraces awaiting them on the porch. This, thought Santa, was surely heaven on earth.

Yet something nagged.

Something was out of place.

Try as he might, he could not fix upon what it might be. He reviewed his deliveries. Everything was in order there, no child overlooked, no gifts switched or omitted.

What was ever so slightly off?

Consternation bedeviled him.

Could Wendy have—?

But Santa suddenly found himself overwhelmed by visions of his darling children the world over, snug in their beds and being so perfectly behaved it sent wave after wave of giggles rippling

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through him. How blessed he was in his task of making them happy!

His momentary upset no more than the shadow of a memory, Santa surrendered to the sea of mirth that surrounded him.

* * *

The Tooth Fairy squatted near the twisted cedar at the northern tip of her island, pelted by raindrops the size of dimes. Water fell from her necklace of blood-flecked teeth, struck her belly, and trickled down her thighs.

Tonight, she had finished her visits early—the eating of teeth, the excreting of coins—and awaited now the return of her sons in their night-black Santa suits, their eyes brimming with lust, their throats disgorging tales of ruffian waifs chased down and gobbled up.

Taking in the gray horizon and the dull thud of waves, she raged against heaven's constraints. Try as she might, she could not again cross paths with the miscreant who called himself Santa Claus. Since their affair, broken off eight years before, such path crossings had been strictly forbidden. Nor, in punishment for her misbehavior, could she feel, once inside their bedrooms, the least menace toward the brats whose teeth she claimed. Done and decoined, outside their bedroom doors, only then was her hatred given free rein. But vile thoughts went no further than the thresholds of those doors, leaving the gap-toothed rug rats untroubled in their sleep.

Bitter triumph that.

Zeus had disallowed wicked thoughts toward children on the day he blasted her womb with thunderbolts. A moment later her imps, from Gronk to Chuff, had blatted fat, bloody, and deformed from her charred sex. But the moment Zeus vanished from the sky, she labored to defy his injunction. It had taken years. She had started on the island and gradually pushed the geography outward. Seven years later, her hatred stretched to the outsides of house. Six months more and the boundary had advanced to the bedroom's exterior. Beyond that, her efforts had failed. It left her choked with fury.

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Then there was the North Pole. Something was shifting up there. She could sense it. Stirring and perturbations in that inbred little community might give her ingress. If she could no longer have the once king of the satyrs sexually, then she would destroy him.

Pan had once been hers, seduced and ensnared when their paths crossed one Christmas Eve. With each secret tryst in home or hidden hut, he had regained the goatish desire of old and deceived the fir nymph Pitys, who had flesh-doughed into a withered kitchen wench of a wife. Then had come his denial of their lust, followed by his ardor for that Rachel mortal, a tantalizing taste disappearing down the Tooth Fairy's gullet. She had turned the woman into a giant coin and made her daughter suffer. Then the big blowhard in the sky, Zeus hidden behind white beard and robes, had pressed Pan back inside Santa, de-satyrized the elves, unsexed the Easter Bunny, and plagued *her* with thirteen stench-ridden brats.

She had always detested children. But atop the mountain of despised brats crawled the vicious brood Zeus had got upon her.

A dark blot appeared on the horizon, a faint buzz in her ears. Its pattern of flight belonged to her firstborn, the sleekest of a fat lot, the smartest of her witless bastards. As he took on form, three more blots stained the gray dropcloth of the heavens, then nine more.

Coming in, Gronk ripped off his blood-caked Santa suit and dropped to the beach. "Mother!" he exclaimed. So too Cagger and Clunch. So Quint and Bunner and Bay. So Prounce, Pum, Frash, Faddle, Zylo, and Zest. So likewise lackluster Chuff, her fattest, ugliest, and least engaged son, scorned by the others for his tepid embrace of evil. Each had brought her the leg bone of a child.

With their mommy they tumbled, suffering the pain she meted out and turning the sand red. When they had had their fill, they hunkered about her, dumb as posts.

"Boys," she said, "I'm hungry for tales of mayhem."

"Me first," said Pum, "me first."

Gronk socked Pum in the eye. "Firstborn first," he insisted. "I bagged fifty urchins, Ma. I tackled the scurrying rats on the run and sucked terror from their skulls. In Bombay and Berlin, in Topeka and Tangiers, I grabbed them, tormenting and torturing

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and shoving them screaming down my gullet. The first was a big-boned beggar boy.”

The Tooth Fairy savored the details, repelled by the teller but caught by the tale. Chuff sat on the sidelines as usual, waiting his turn as the last teller while his brothers roughhoused for position. Eyes were blacked, flesh flayed, arm bones snapped and mended. “Hurt him,” she shouted as they tore into one another. “Hurt that scum bum.” She didn’t care who doled out or suffered injury. Violence trumped the niceties of identity.

At last the tales were told, including Chuff’s meager three child killings, which drew jeers and beatings about the head from the others. “Splendid, boys. Pain and death are the just deserts of every child. Theirs from the womb are the seeds of nastiness. The so-called good ones are simply better at concealing the blackness of their hearts. We’ll get to them, fear not.

“Does Mommy love you?”

“No!” they shouted.

“Do you love Mommy?”

“No!”

“Love is a fable,” she said. “What force binds us?”

“Hatred!”

“Rightly do we fear and hate our differences. Sink your claws deep enough into them and you reach a common denominator of blood. Cling to mayhem. Adore the fist. Gullet and gore first, then sleep. Right, boys?”

Brutish concurrence befouled the air.

“Pan’s got it good now. But we’ll seek out cracks in his smarmy little community and shatter it. We’ll goad his elves. We’ll destroy Wendy’s respect for him. Gone all harmony there. And gone all harmony on earth, what meager amount exists. Generosity of spirit? It shall scarce be remembered, let alone felt and acted upon. We’ll continue humankind’s well-advanced corruption. Do I want to avenge myself upon Pan, to goad his hidden nature into the open? Of course. But more than that, I would shatter the Sky God’s complacency, undermining his faith in his own creation. Do these goals seem too ambitious? I tell you, they are within reach. The time is coming. I can feel it. The time when the earth turns, when

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we topple the big blowhard in the sky and take control. Gone all hope, gone charity, fragile myths of goodness and redemption exploded everywhere.”

Dull though her boys were, at this their eyes glowed.

“So nurse your bile. Bicker and brawl. Stay in shape, my sons, stay attuned. This is thy nature, this the destiny of humankind.”

At that, they rose up and retackled their mother. And mayhem most foul again stained the strand, as rain fell upon them in smacks and stabs from a gray-black bank of clouds.

* * *

One of Santa’s helpers never frolicked on Christmas Day.

That one was Gregor, who sat slumped and glowering at his spotless desk. Engelbert and Josef were out there somewhere, compromising the dignity of their family. When they were gone from the stables, Gregor often sat here, his lantern casting its emerald glare across a clutter-free desktop and its foursquare, precisely positioned blotter. Sitting bolt upright in his office chair, he muttered and mulled.

“Something isn’t right with us. We’ve changed, and I don’t know why. It’s connected with the arrival of Rachel and Wendy. That much I know.” Gregor wrestled with eight years of memory loss, a loose tooth he was forever niggling at before turning to whatever currently vexed him. “Something very...untoward went on back then. *I* was okay. I kept my virtue. But aren’t all the elves virtuous? Hah! We are not. *They* were not. God robbed us of our untoward memories. But I sense a nasty lurker, around a corner my mind cannot turn no matter how vigorously it tries. They were sinners, their cover of simpering innocence blown.

“Happy? Of course, we’re happy. Servile, vapid, and bubble-headed happy. Why, if it weren’t for good old Gregor, chaos would reign. I’m the linchpin. Old Saint Nick, he’s just a big baby, fascinated by children and childhood. See how he looks at Wendy, a perfect age on the outside, but he’s not so sure about her growing up in her mind. He’d rather she remain an ideal eternal little girl. Anya and Rachel? Blindworms who encourage their jolly old hubby’s boyish nature. Well, if Santa won’t lead, I will. Step into

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the vacuum of guidance, impose order, regiment the busy bees, marshal our forces to take back those stolen memories.”

Gregor brooded.

An index finger moved toward his nose.

I will not, he thought.

But he did, a slave to habit.

Infuriating!

“We’re *all* doing this. The fools think they’re unobserved. But Gregor knows all. The nervous tic crept in about the time Rachel and Wendy showed up, after the untoward whatever-it-was. I watch them do it. Fingers that probe. Nose. Mouth. It’s disgusting. But I do it too. Heaven help me, I’m doing it right now—Gregor, the moral compass for this wayward band of elves. No one has seen me sinning, of that I’m sure. I’ve admonished some of them. Stop doing that, I insist. Keep that finger away from your nose. For the love of God, pay attention to what you’re about. Do they listen? Does it stick? It does not.

“Something more is needed to whip them into shape. But what?”

Gregor mulled in torment, rooting for a booger even as he berated himself.

Be strong, he thought.

Then the idea blossomed. Gregor thump-fisted his blotter. “I can do it. But wait, can I really? Or am I deceiving myself? This deserves careful cogitation.”

His eyes narrowed. There in the harsh lantern light, he dug and indulged, both his tormented thoughts and his probing finger. From fresh-strewn stalls came the shifts and settlings of Santa’s slumbering team. But Gregor, deeply ensconced in fierce brooding, noticed it hardly at all.

Chapter 2. Things Ever So Slightly Awry

THE NEXT MORNING Santa was in fine fettle. At each workbench he had placed a copy of the year's plans. They were ambitious, as always, but his helpers' ability to reach and exceed whatever goals he set had never come up short.

He spoke extempore at the lectern, his note cards before him in a neat untouched pile. "Welcome," he said, "welcome each one, you of skilled hands, gentle hearts, and great good humor. My multitudinous crew of cheerful companions, in this divine endeavor we are brothers all. There exists no greater joy than to be generous to children and so encourage generosity in them."

Santa had become adept at hiding fear and anger since the day the Father had suppressed his Pan side. Fear that the goat god would reemerge or that the Tooth Fairy would once more try his virtue. Anger at her past outrages against his loved ones. These emotions were at times great within him, but always under his control. Still, he played the jolly old elf now, and was jolly indeed, inspiring his helpers and getting off to a grand start the new year of toymaking.

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“So rev up those engines,” he concluded, “stoke the fires of your enthusiasm, and let us bring smiles to the faces of good little children everywhere next Christmas.”

For months, Santa’s life was bliss. Wendy helped keep his elves focused. His wives enriched his life, both in the bedroom and out of it. And he maintained a healthy balance between work and play. He especially cherished walks in the woods, by himself in the hours before dawn, and with Rachel, Wendy, Anya, or all three, at other times of the day. But his favorite pastime was reading to Wendy, snuggled against him on his lap or, more often, tucked in and listening enthralled.

The community, as always, dove joyously into the task of restocking their shelves, for it took precisely a year of diligent effort to prepare for the next Christmas delivery.

Still, undercurrents of unease flowed within him that winter, spring, and far into the summer. In all that time, Santa’s feeling that something had gone awry never quite lifted. Lately it had returned in full force. Many were the nights he lay abed between Rachel and Anya, wide awake under moonlight, trying to seize by the arms the elusive problem and stare it full in the face.

One August night in his workshop office, with his helpers tucked snug in their beds and midnight long fled, Santa removed a Coke bottle from the squat red dispenser in the far corner of his office and sat down to focus on what had changed since Rachel and Wendy’s arrival.

“Must take stock,” he murmured.

To be sure, they had brought an abundance of grace and joy into his life. How splendid it had been to befriend and grow to love these mortals, how satisfying to overcome his Pan-inspired lust for the Tooth Fairy, to beat back her attack against them, and to see them resurrect, through miracle, from horrendous deaths unto immortality. How beyond the blessings one could wish, to be wedded by God Almighty himself to Rachel and Anya in the forest, as the elves marveled and sang and made merry.

Santa set these wonders aside. “If I’m to address the Problem That Resists Detection, I’ve got to focus on what must be accepted—here in this private sanctum—as my failings.

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“First,” he said, ticking the issues off on his fingers, “I’ve been drinking far too much Coke. It’s become a mindless habit.” He lifted the bottle to his lips, stared at it, and set it aside. One a day had become half a dozen. Sometimes he could not recall retrieving the bottle from the dispenser, so automatic had the habit grown. “I’ll wean myself, go gradual into diminishment.”

This simple resolve pleased him. “Second, I’ve been giving my helpers far less guidance than they’re used to. Not that they’re not completely competent without it. They simply need more engagement than I’ve afforded them lately. A wink, a nod. There’s a childishness about me these days, a tendency to avoid the serious, even when it would be appropriate.” Was that where the problem lay? He pondered in his heart, shook his head, and ticked off another finger.

“Third, Rachel and Anya.” Santa smiled. Simply grand having two such loving helpmates. No problems there. “I’ve never been happier. And I know they’re happy too, because they tell me so, often, in many ways.” Was he tempted by the Tooth Fairy, once the fierce ash nymph Adrasteia, who had been willingly ravaged by Pan more frequently and with greater gusto than her sister nymphs? Not in the least. “She’s monstrous.” He wondered what he had ever seen in her. As far as he was concerned, their trysts were ancient history.

“Ah yes, fourth, Pan.” He put a hand to his lips, dreading that having uttered the name might once more summon that side of him, might awaken that voice of savagery and disrespect for all civilized norms. “I fear him, a dark rumbling terror that never quite leaves me.” Hmm, could that be it? He didn’t think so, but it would reward revisiting. Though God had tucked his Pan self deep inside his psyche, Santa sensed the goat god lurking.

He shuddered and went on.

“Fifth, my own intolerance.”

Ooh, warm indeed. He glanced at the thick book resting on its special podium in one corner of the office. Bound in black leather, it shifted and changed during his weekly survey of the globe, editing or deleting entries when naughtiness, adulthood, or death claimed a child. The niceness section of the book had grown noticeably

slimmer, in number of pages yes, but also in commentary. “And the annotations on my naughty list have become more acerbic these past many years. Used to be simply a name and a phrase.” Talks back to her mom. Cheats on tests. Thinks mean thoughts about his little sister. Torments the cat.

“Now I go on for paragraphs, berating them for falling away from the innocence of toddlerdom.” Maybe that’s why he had been overdoing the jolly old elf, to counterbalance his increased outrage at the sorry state of modern children. Still, that wasn’t based on misperception. The world had indeed grown grimmer. Grown-ups and wicked kids hurtling tail-over-teakettle toward adulthood *deserved* his scorn. “Hmm,” he said, stopping himself from getting worked up. “Perhaps Pan isn’t so dead in me, after all.”

Another issue to revisit.

He turned down his fifth finger and raised his other thumb.

“Sixth and last, there’s Wendy.” A high soft chime sounded in his brain. “My dear, darling girl. All seems to be well with her. But oh, that...hesitation as we flew in.” In his mind’s eye, he sat in his sleigh, looking over at her, asking about her visits.

Surely inconsequential in the grand scheme of things, that momentary pause. But he saw now, eight months after the fact, that it was anything *but* inconsequential. “There was a certain tonal shift when she mentioned—what was the boy’s name?—Jamie Stratton.”

He hunched forward in his chair. “That’s it. I minimized the signs. Wendy hesitates to speak of uncomfortable things, not wanting to deflate my buoyancy. But if I can’t—”

He choked up. If he couldn’t get right with his own little girl, how could he hope to get right with all the world’s children? That was the most pressing problem. The others would wait.

“Tomorrow, when I tuck the covers about her, I’ll assure her I’m okay with whatever discomfort she throws at me. Like the caring dad I am. Not some silly jokester who holds off sorrows with a jest.”

That was it.

He replayed the moments in the sleigh and kicked himself for not seeing it sooner. “But I see it now.” And he would address it, give comfort to his child who looked nine but was seventeen inside.

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It was time to grow up, take the reins of parental responsibility firmly in hand, and offer his counsel or condolence for whatever was troubling her. For he saw now, replaying the months since Christmas, how many other signs there had been, looks, sighs, shrugs. How could he have missed them all?

“No need to berate or browbeat.” He took a deep swig of Coke, the bittersweet bubbles gassy in his belly. “I recognize them now. Must lay my cards on the table and ask her to do the same. Yes, that’s what I’ll do.”

* * *

Eight years had elapsed since Wendy’s mom had passed horrendously through the guts of the Tooth Fairy into the likeness of a huge coin and, by God’s grace, become Santa and Anya’s immortal mate; eight years since Wendy herself had been blessed with immortality. She took delight in helping Anya cook and sew, in learning elfin crafts, in being read bedtime stories as her eyelids grew heavy and an invisible Sandman made his nightly visit to sprinkle sleepy dust into her eyes.

But she took special delight in choosing one hundred deserving boys and girls to visit on Christmas Eve. These she woke one by one, giving them world-revealing rides in her sleigh, projecting into their bedrooms highlights of their futures, and leaving them with a kiss on the forehead and memories which, though they faded into dream, helped keep their destinies focused ever after.

Earlier on the day Santa agonized in his study, Wendy took Fritz and Herbert aside and posed the question.

“Why are they so mean?” Fritz repeated between wee nibbles on a hollyberry croissant. “Maybe they convince themselves they know best; and so great are their convictions, that they force things, bad things that seem good to them, upon others. Ooh, this croissant is delicious. Take a bite. No a bigger bite! Truth to tell, I have no idea. Other than you and Rachel, I’ve never seen a mortal, up close in real life. And you two are as far from meanness as a smile is from a frown. What about you, Herbert? Any ideas?”

His companion looked blank, shrugged, and said nothing as usual, though his mouth moved in half-hearted guppy puckers and his wide eyes begged pardon for his ignorance.

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“Herbert doesn’t know either. Have you asked Santa? I’ll bet he’d have an answer right off.”

Wendy said she hadn’t, but would definitely consider it. Then she thanked them. “Hey, Herbert,” she said, “Don’t look so glum. No one can know everything. And I think you make the bestest cameras in the whole wide world.”

Herbert brightened at that, which cheered Wendy too.

Months before, she had posed the question to her mommies, tossing it off as casual as could be. “Don’t you go fretting,” Anya had said. “Mortals are just that way.”

Which was no help at all.

Rachel had been a little better. “Some people,” she said, “are drawn to be selfish or hurtful, to play power games that one-up themselves and one-down everybody else.”

Wendy had asked *why* they were drawn that way and Rachel danced around the issue in a tone more suited to a nine-year-old.

Wendy thanked her and went her way.

On the very day they returned, as she brushed Galatea in the stables, she had asked Gregor. Harrumphing in the grand Gregor manner, he said, “By ‘mean,’ you’re referring no doubt to the wars, the lies, the cheating, the posturing, the violence, the twisted warps of their minds down countless rat holes of rottenness, all that nonsense.”

And when she said yes: “They’re no damned good, that’s why.” He gave a sharp nod and a hmph, as though he had solved the riddle of the Sphinx. “Your good little girls and boys? They’re not all they’re cracked up to be. Relax the whip hand and they stray. You’ve heard of gravity? As they bulk up, gravity drags them down into mischief. Babies are light as feathers, more angel than beast. Ah, but put on flesh, let hormones flow, and excess carnality moves them to crime and lies, backbiting and bad habits, just like certain elves I could name. Tight rein must be kept on the lot of them!”

Gregor had amused but not enlightened.

Why *not* ask Santa Claus? When matters took on great urgency, one had to speak or explode. But her stepfather was such a wonderful grown-up little boy, beaming with mirth at good little children, but so disappointed with the bad ones that he never spoke

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of them. How could he possibly help with poor Jamie and the mean people in his life? How could she think to wound her father's spirit by bringing them up?

Wendy reached the gingerbread house where she often went to ponder weighty matters. It was quiet here, bright with gingham and bone china and flowered wallpaper and a gold-and-rosewood grandfather clock that gently knocked aside every other second.

She sat in the rocking chair by the picture window and gazed out at a peaceful blanket of snow upon the commons and fresh drifts on the roofs across the way. So peaceful up here, so needlessly stressful the world of mortals. It was the height of satisfaction to assist the elves when she was able, to track toys she had helped with into the homes of good little children, seeing their faces light up at their caregivers' generosity. Such was the true spirit of Christmas. Selfless giving. And Santa Claus, above all, epitomized that abundant spirit of generosity—toward her, his helpers, his wives, and all the world's youngsters.

He was a cornucopia of giving, an outpouring that never let up, not for one moment. How could she ask him for more? She grew aware of frown lines on her forehead. Her shoulders were tense. Her hands gripped the lacquered dragonheads at the ends of the rocker's arms as her pinkies slipped into their sharp-toothed mouths and dared them to bite down.

"I'll ask him, though," she said with conviction. He's *got* to help, even if he just listens and consoles and admits he's helpless to do anything. But maybe he isn't so helpless after all. Santa was always surprising her, even after eight years of growing in the generous soil of his nurturing. Perhaps there were surprises still, even ones that would surprise *him*.

Wendy pushed off with her feet and slid back into the big rocker's rollicking bucket. The snowscape suddenly climbed on board, cradled in the clumsy arms of a vast sea. "Hey, I can hope," she said. "And where there's hope, there's fire. That's what Santa says, and I intend to hold him to it!"

She giggled at that, then stopped and felt anew her frown lines, growing very solemn indeed and choking back tears at her

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memories of Jamie Stratton and what lay, not so very far ahead, in his future.

Chapter 3. Confiding in Santa Claus

THAT NIGHT, after reading Wendy a chapter of *Les Misérables*, Santa closed the book and set it on her nightstand. But instead of bending to kiss her cheek, he sat back and sighed and looked straight at her. “Sweetheart,” he said, “Rachel and Anya and I have noticed that all is not right with you. Please don’t deny it. Something’s bothering you. Something big.”

Relief appeared on her face. “Yes.”

“I’ve minimized the signs,” said Santa. “But I won’t do that any longer. You’re growing up inside, and your concerns, I’ll wager, are growing up too.”

Once he had begun, it felt good to be leveling, good to give up his absurd little-girl wish about her and let her be who she was. She seemed to blossom. Where he had seen only the innocence of the child, now he saw maturity informing the precious intelligence before him.

“The last boy I visited Christmas Eve?” she said, sitting up and tenting the blankets with her knees. “Jamie Stratton?” She threatened to choke up, but kept her emotions in check. Only the moistness of her eyes and a catch in her voice betrayed her. “I show the kids scenes from their futures, skipping over childhood

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cruelties, scrapes, shin barks, bee stings, all of that. And so I did with Jamie.

“But I looked deeper into his future, and what I left out was pretty disturbing. Since Christmas, I’ve gone back and looked again. I don’t like what I see.”

Santa guessed she had ventured into his teen years, or worse, his years as a grown-up. He wanted no part in these visions, but Wendy’s well-being trumped his distaste. “Perhaps,” he said, “you should show me.”

“Yes,” said Wendy, relieved. “I’d like that.”

She nodded toward the far wall. Out sprang Jamie as he was, an eight-year-old on a banana bike, pumping through his neighborhood, the deafening scatter of dead leaves beneath his wheels. He was bright, wiry, and full of energy. It was clear why he had made Wendy’s list. There followed short scenes that buttressed that view: Jamie playing a halting violin piece for his mother’s birthday, astonishing his third-grade teacher with the wisdom of an answer, soothing a little girl with a scraped knee until her parents rushed to her aid.

“Okay, now watch.”

Wendy gave a barely perceptible nod.

* * *

In the moments that followed, Wendy watched Santa lose his innocence. It was heart-wrenching. She berated herself, yet she went on, needing to share her terrible knowledge and to seek her stepfather’s guidance.

First she showed him a schoolyard skirmish, more hurtful to Jamie emotionally than physically. “Sissy Jamie, Sissy Jamie,” taunted the boys. A fifth grader, Freddy Maxon, held him down and pinched his ears.

“But I visited little Freddy’s house,” said Santa, the wind gone from his sails. “I visited all their houses.”

“There were more such incidents,” said Wendy. “Then this.”

Dusk. An older taller Jamie, carrying a bag of groceries, walked past a vacant lot. “He’s twelve.” The lot wasn’t so vacant after all. “These three kids hang out together. The one in front is Matt Beluzzo. Held back twice, a ninth grader here, sixteen.”

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Jamie looked up, startled. When he made to bolt, the two others grabbed him from behind and his bag spilled onto the sidewalk. Matt jabbed a finger at Jamie's face. "You're a queer boy," he said.

"I'm not," protested Jamie.

"Yeah, that's it, only a queer boy would brownnose the fuckin' teachers like you do. You got a queer boy's name. Not like me. Matt. A good, solid name, as solid as my fist. You like lessons. I hate 'em. But I got a lesson for you. Right here and now."

Then the beating began.

Wendy shut it off. "Daddy? Are you all right?"

"You see why I prefer the company of young children." He pulled out a handkerchief, blew his nose, and dried his eyes. "But I can take it. Show me more."

Wendy told him that Jamie's face was bloodied and bruised and he walked with difficulty for days, but no bones were broken. Beluzzo had threatened worse if he told, and Jamie hadn't told. Wendy brought up Jamie's father, red-faced, standing before his son, shouting at him, "You gotta stand up to bullies. They're cowards. They deserve reform school is what they deserve. You tell me their names and I'll sic the cops on them."

"Walter Stratton, all grown up," said Santa with scorn.

"He means well," said Wendy, "but he's...he's distant from Jamie. A sports fanatic. Closer to his other son."

"The older brother. Kurt's a great kid."

Wendy agreed. Then she said, "There are three critical factors that lead to...to what I'll show you at the end. The beating was one of them. The second was the cumulative effect of hearing this next man Sunday after Sunday."

Before them thundered a tall, thin, white-haired preacher, mute now, behind a podium. "Ty Taylor. Over there, seventh pew on the right, are the Strattons, Kurt on the aisle, then Dad, Mom, and Jamie."

"Ty was a nice little boy, very neat, happy, and obedient. I put a rocking horse, a cowboy hat, and a cap pistol under the tree when he was seven. What's he all worked up about?"

"This." Wendy turned up the gain.

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“I see before me a vast multitude of families,” said Ty Taylor, “the proud bulwark of the church and of what’s left of virtue in this sad secular society. But the family is crumbling. And upon the sand of weakened families, the house known as the United States of America shall crumble and fall. Unless, my friends, unless righteous followers of Christ hold back the floodwaters and shore up the levees of this nation’s moral might, unless we renovate and rebuild in God’s image.

“Gays and lesbians, they call themselves. But call them what they are. Sodomites, sinners, sheep strayed into the wolfish wilds of homosexual misbehavior. They have the temerity to tout their ungodly ways, strutting and preening like peacocks, and setting up so-called churches of their own. But creatures of Satan can only worship Satan, no matter how hard they pretend otherwise. They prattle in vain, these deviants from the straight and narrow. Come Judgment Day, they shall be harshly judged. In the days of glory, they will not be with us in heaven. No, for they shall burn eternally in the bowels of hell, the all-consuming fires of their infinite suffering declaiming the glory of their creator and redeemer, whose words they heeded not, though they were given every chance to repent and reform.”

Wendy muted the preacher. “There’s lots more.”

“They suffer this man to preach?” There was an ache in Santa’s voice that touched Wendy’s heart.

“They can’t get enough of him,” she said. “His is the best-attended evangelical church in their community. But look.” Wendy gestured, and she and Santa and the bed glided down the center aisle. Jamie’s family came closer and then his face. It spoke volumes.

“I’m guessing,” said Santa softly, “the Strattons are faithful churchgoers.”

“Every Sunday without fail. Tearing down homosexuals is Ty’s favorite tactic. It fills the coffers twice as fast as his railings against abortion. Daddy, you’re so pale. I have to show you two more scenes, but I can do it another time.”

“No, go on. You see why I have no truck with grown-ups. How far they fall from childhood. It’s an eternal mystery to me, why they

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fail to remain wrapped in divinity, turning away from creativity and kindness. Go on, Wendy. Show me the rest.”

“All right.” The church vanished. “Four years pass and Jamie’s in the eleventh grade.” The den where Wendy had watched him practice the violin appeared, an easy chair, a couch, a TV set, and a paint-by-number harbor scene on a wood-paneled wall. Jamie, a handsome sixteen, sat in shame on the couch, his hands clasped between his knees. His parents stood over him.

“You are *not* gay,” his mother said, rigid and pasty-faced.

“Come to your senses, son,” said his father. “Don’t upset your mother with such talk.”

“It’s disgusting,” she said. “*You’re* disgusting. Who recruited you? Some older boy? I’ll claw his eyes out. You are *not* this way. You’re my son, you hear me? God will hurl you into hell and you’ll burn forever. Do you want that? Answer me!”

“No, Mom.”

“Walter, talk some sense into your son.”

Wendy let the scene play on in pantomime.

Santa’s voice was husky and soft. “Kathy’s her name. Her last name was MacLaren when I visited her house, Christmas Eves long ago. She loved floppy dolls. She hugged her stuffed cat Jeffrey until he was lumpy and faded. Back then, Kathy wore pigtails and beamed with joy.”

“In her own way, she loves her sons. But she loves God more.”

Santa laughed. “Some God.”

Wendy replaced the den scene with an overpass across a highway. The traffic below was busy and fast, the sound muted.

“They took him out of school and sent him to an intensive one-week cure-all in the Adirondacks. A stern-faced counselor berated him, threatened hellfire, and mocked his tears and protests.”

Jamie appeared along the sidewalk. When he reached the center of the overpass, he shrugged off his backpack, unzipped it, and removed two apples.

“The cure-all people starved him. Several times a night, they woke him with harsh lights and barked orders to get down and do fifty push-ups. They showed him photos of attractive boys and slapped him hard. They showed him prim-faced girls in their

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Sunday best and gave him ice cream. In the end he pretended conversion. They let him go.”

Jamie stared intently along the interstate. He dropped an apple over the side, following its fall.

“What’s he doing?” asked Santa.

“He’s gauging when to drop the apple so it hits the roadway just in front of an oncoming big rig.”

Jamie raised the second apple, that same intent stare. He held it over the parapet and let it go.

“You don’t mean he’s...”

Jamie hoisted himself to a sitting position facing traffic and watched the flow. Wendy floated herself and Santa over the parapet and down into traffic. They were peering into the cabin at a driver, whose body tensed as his eyes went wide. Then she wiped away the screech of brakes and the expletive coming from him and his muscular arms stiff on the steering wheel. “That’s Ernie Strauss, barreling toward New Mexico with a cargo of washer-dryer combinations behind him. By some miracle, he didn’t die. Nor did he cause a pile-up.”

“I should have come to you sooner.”

“I’m sorry, Daddy.”

“No, it’s okay. I—”

“I’m so sorry.” Wendy could no longer keep from crying. Santa seemed broken, like her old neighbor Mrs. Fredericks’ husband. She had done this. She had taken him from joviality to shock and despair.

He held her tight. “You mustn’t blame yourself. Whatever is bothering you you’ve got to share with me or Anya or your mom. Always, always. That’s all we want.”

That freed something in her and she sobbed against Santa’s chest until her throat hurt. “We’ve got to *do* something to rescue him. Can we, Daddy? Can we save his life?”

“Yes,” said Santa, without hesitation. “We’ve got to. But I don’t see how. We’re up here. We deliver toys and wonder. What can we do? I don’t yet know the answer, but we will do something. I’ll discuss it with Anya and Rachel. We’ll put our minds to it. We’ll devise a plan.”

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Santa's resolve touched her. To him, every life was precious. In her heart of hearts, Wendy knew he could work wonders. She trusted him to find a way to alter Jamie Stratton's future. But she also steeled herself for disappointment. Though she and Santa touched the lives of children intimately in many ways, there seemed an unbridgeable gap between this world and the world of mortals.

Still, for a time, Wendy took comfort in the assured embrace of her father, and hoped for the best.

Chapter 4. Parental Discussions and Mullings

RACHEL HAD NEVER SEEN SANTA so distraught, pacing before them in the bedroom. His red robe flapped impatiently against his ankles.

“Oh, Claus,” said Anya, “you promised to do something?”

“That was foolish, wasn’t it? Yet somehow I felt, beyond all reason, that a door will open, a path unfold. I haven’t been shown such horrors for nothing.”

Rachel wisely held her tongue until Anya was done. She was the reconciler. She patched things up in their threesome. Not that Santa and Anya had violent disagreements. But Santa’s Pan side flared up, as did Anya’s fir nymph, more frequently than either of them liked to admit.

“You’ll disappoint her,” said Anya, propped against a pillow in her flannel nightgown and wire-rimmed glasses. “Wendy trusts the great Santa Claus to figure out how to spare this little boy his fate. Well, forgive an old lady her frankness, but preventing the suffering of one child among millions is not what you’re here for.”

“Anya, please.”

“You make and distribute toys. You’re the scent of pine needles and the glitter of tinsel. You’re anticipation, the jingle of bells and

the brief sorrow at just missing your visit because they can't keep their eyelids open. But really, Claus, saving a teenager from suicide? How? Why?"

"Because Wendy pleaded. And because I knew right then that it's possible. If I had shrugged and said, 'I'm sorry, Wendy, I can't,' it would have been a lie."

Anya glanced at Rachel for support, then back at Santa. "It defies logic."

"Precisely," he said. "There's no logic to it at all. Might she be disappointed? She might. But I don't think so. I think, against all logic, that there's something Wendy and I can do to save this boy."

"Even supposing you can, where will it end? Do you think Wendy will stop at one? No, there will be scores, hundreds of little boys and girls whose futures need brightening. Perhaps you should promise to make everything rosy for all the people in the whole world, now and to come, in perpetuity. Perhaps *you're* the Savior after all; it isn't the Son of God at all. Forgive me, I'm being sarcastic. Sarcasm isn't much help."

"No," said Santa, "I understand."

The argument's sharp edges had started to dull, and Rachel saw her entree: "I'm concerned mostly, I guess, about Wendy. Then I remind myself that inside she's seventeen. And for all its heartache, seventeen's pretty resilient. I agree, Anya, that there's no way Santa can do anything." She looked at her husband. "But, I also agree with *you* that something must be done."

The hint of a smile played upon Santa's face, not in triumph over Anya but in appreciation for Rachel.

"It seems to me," she went on, "that you and Wendy are too close to the shock of what you've witnessed to arrive at an easy conclusion. These are future events. If indeed there *is* a way to avert them, you have time to figure out how."

Santa, considering her words, approached the bed. He sat on its edge and took his wives' hands. "You're right of course. And Anya, you're right too. Nothing either one of you has said hasn't already occurred to me. This question needs sleeping on. Maybe I'm deluding myself. But I'm going to bang my head against the

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heavens anyway. I'll either have a breakthrough or give up in defeat. But I'll be okay, and so will Wendy, if it comes to that."

"If it's any consolation," said Anya, "I hope I'm wrong."

"Thank you, sweetheart." He leaned in and gave his first wife a kiss. "And thank you, Rachel dear." She took Santa's generous lips onto hers, thrilled as always by his touch. "I do believe," he said, honey in his voice, "it's time to douse the lights, celebrate our holy union, and let Hypnos, the God of Sleep—what's he called these days, the Sandman?—and his sons lure us into the land of dreams."

"Why you old satyr," said Anya in mock scold. "You're always ready, aren't you?"

"For my darling nymph and my once-mortal lover, yes yes and yes again."

Anya smiled. Then, leaning to her nightstand, she blew out her lantern, as Rachel did hers. And for a time, naught but giggles and sighs, gasps and caresses, and the sweet intimacies of love held sway in the Clausean marriage bed.

Chapter 5. Innocence and Shame

WHEN HE ISN'T DELIVERING BASKETS on his special night each year, the Easter Bunny has time to kill. The colored eggs his hens lay roll down long ramps to be stored away, never spoiling or cracking, but hardboiled as they emerge. Likewise his well-lubricated, maintenance-free machines turn out an abundance of jellybeans, marshmallow chicks, chocolate bunnies, and clear, thin shreds of shiny green plastic. Without intervention of any kind, ingredients appear and are processed, their end products stored in spotless bins or upon shelves, to be miraculously assembled at unfathomable depths into baskets as Easter approaches. Come the night of delivery, into magic time he vanishes, reaching a paw into the void and pulling out just the right basket for the mortal whose life, at that moment, he graces. Then a tumble across carpet and a quick dive through permeable windows brings him out into the night air where he speeds to his next destination.

So goes the Easter Bunny's divinely decreed routine. Content he is, and more than content, with this.

What then does he do after each morning's look-in at the hens? He roams the earth, searching for loving couples in their moments of intimacy. Now you are not to think his voyeurism unholy, as

indeed it had been before the Father's neutering transformation of him. Though he recalled none of his past, he had been monstrous then, steeped in lust and envy and capable of monstrous deeds. He had sold his soul to the Tooth Fairy, tormented Wendy, attacked Anya, and violated Rachel. Then had God visited his burrow and reached back in time to the moment of his creation to eradicate his sex organs.

Nowadays, he sought the most loving couples instinct led him to, blessing, by observing them, their intimacies. At the moment, he was sitting on his haunches in a high-fenced backyard where, between two trees, a hammock was stretched. Within it lay an Australian man and woman, upon a temperate afternoon, wiling away the time in marital bliss. As Ray gripped her inner thigh, Penelope pleased herself. Her face went taut and Ray told her she was beautiful.

In the Easter Bunny's opinion, both of them were paragons of beauty—not simply in the skin or limbs or musculature, but in their hearts, which lay exposed to him. Penelope and Ray were recent newlyweds, second marriages both, childless their first, by design in her case, by low sperm count in his. They had spoken of adoption, though they much preferred spawning a child of their own. This, in fact, was the other criterion that influenced the Easter Bunny's choice of lovers to visit.

For he was able to observe the liquidity of their letting-go, to guide eggward the jet of sperm, and with a twitch of his nose and a bit of body English to propel one hearty spermatozoa into the great plunge, thereby setting into motion the wondrous process of incubation. Once he had accomplished that task for Penelope and Ray, he leaped for joy, splitting the sky with inaudible yips of delight.

Then he settled down to bask in the afterglow and listen in on their sweet conversation. Penelope said she felt as if some benevolent god had spread a canopy of divine approval over their coupling, and Ray agreed.

Even so, despite his chattering joy, the Easter Bunny felt a decided lack of something. This lack wasn't connected to the

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aforementioned lust or envy, for he no longer suffered under their spell.

Shame was what he felt, vague but ever present.

He knew not why. To his knowledge, he had done nothing to be ashamed of. Still, there the shame was. He felt a need to make restitution, to recover something that had been lost.

Now you are not to suppose that this recoverable something was his penis and testicles, for he missed them not at all. God's makeover had been thorough, and an envy of mortal organs in no way figured in his sense of loss.

If pressed to say what precisely he had lost, the Easter Bunny would have paused and pondered and said, "I guess it's the pastel goodness of Easter, the happiness of the hunt for eggs in tall grass, the contentment of sunny spring days with the air fresh and quiet, and the companionship loving, familial, and free." For his shame had in some small measure dulled for him the sensory delights of Easter. Scents were a tad muted, colors not quite so intense, textures less distinct.

The sheen upon the eggshell of life had dimmed.

He sighed. Even so, it contented him to observe the Rays and Penelopes of the world and to usher along the regeneration of life, womb-whole and poised to drop squalling and perfect into the world.

Into the sky over Brisbane he bounded, shooting north and east toward a humble home outside of Santa Fe, a few miles along Artist's Way yet not quite as far as Ten Thousand Waves.

* * *

The next day, Santa's distraught looks were bruited about from workbench to workbench. Something in him had changed, but no one dared ask what. They observed him sighing and pacing in his office, sitting jittery-legged on a tall stool downing Coke after Coke, worrying over a cuckoo clock with wee little screwdrivers beneath an intense pool of light. He seemed older, more frazzled, far less sure of himself than usual.

Why don't I just ask him, Fritz wondered. It isn't as if he isn't approachable. He's *very* approachable.

But Fritz knew nobody was about to ask him. If Santa had something to tell them, he would choose his own time to do so.

So far had the buzz spread that Gregor and his brothers, Josef and Engelbert, dropped by from the stables, ostensibly to pitch in where they were needed. But Gregor's fierce eyes, darting everywhere at once, told a different tale. It surprised no one when his brothers spread word of a meeting at the Chapel after lights out.

The day having fled, Fritz and Herbert trudged through moonlit snow, past the stables and up into the woods behind the workshop. In twos and threes traipsed Santa's helpers, threading past boulders and clusters of pine trees. They carried lanterns, held high or swinging from lax hands. The long line of elves snaked its way to the Chapel, a bowed configuration of trees where God had joined Santa and Anya and Rachel in holy matrimony eight years before.

As the final stragglers found their places, Gregor strode to the fore. The moonlight was most intense where the Almighty had stood, and into it stepped Gregor. He planted his feet firm, crossed his arms in a tight harrumph, and glared over the sea of elves, saying nothing. He nodded. Again. A third nod. Laughter rippled through the crowd. But Gregor did not crack a smile and the laughter died down as quickly as it had begun.

Fritz leaned to Herbert. "This must be about Santa, don't you think?"

Herbert shrugged and nodded, shook his head no, and shrugged again.

Gregor pointed sharply into the crowd. Stabs, as if to say, Caught you! Caught you! He would point, then withdraw his hand and tuck it decisively back into the crook of his opposite elbow.

"I see you," he said at last. "I see you all. You think Santa has changed? *We* have changed. We all saw Santa in his office, looking older. Some weight has been dropped on the big baby's toes. I have no idea what. Tomorrow, it may vanish. He'll be his same damned cheery old self. But you and I have changed in the years since Wendy and Rachel arrived, since Knecht Rupert played the organ for the wedding while Johann and Gustav worked the bellows. Our hands stayed at our sides, or busied themselves with making toys,

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or buried themselves in our pockets, or gesticulated to match our words, or little-boy'd behind our backs, or tossed our caps into the heavens at Santa's return on Christmas morning.

"But more and more our hands have begun acting shamefully. It has become habitual. I notice it. I marvel that no one else notices it."

Fritz wondered what Gregor was talking about. He thought himself fairly observant, yet he had seen nothing special. He stared at his hands and let them drop.

Gregor extended his index fingers as though making a point. His elbows were bent at perfect right angles. "Observe these fingers. They have never, not once, known sin." He stood erect and fierce. "Fingers find nostrils, do they not? They root about in them. They ferret out certain...prizes. Certain soft foul discolorations that gloop up into shameless droppings at a fingertip's end. Sometimes these prizes—"

(again he put a nasty spin on the word)

"—are smeared on sleeves or handkerchiefs or workbench surfaces, to dry and crust and be brushed away. But in the extreme, certain as yet unnamed miscreants *eat* what they find. I have seen it. In the workshop, I have seen it. In the commons, I have seen it. Tonight, at this very gathering, here in this hallowed place, I have seen it. Over and over and over. The practice squanders our energy. It vitiates us. The act is vile, disgusting, bestial, self-abusive, and downright unelflike."

Fritz looked at Herbert, who no longer smiled but stared at him from beneath a cloud of shame. In truth, Fritz felt shame of his own, though he was not sure why. Did Gregor have a point?

"The nose," continued Gregor, tapping his bulbous proboscis, "is a wondrous organ. Sensitive to mere hints of aroma, capacious and wide of nostril to welcome in fresh air, capable of issuing sharp sniffs of disapproval—and there is so much in this world to disapprove of. What a wondrous organ is the nose."

He paused to impale them on his glare and to set up, by silence, his next point, as a tennis player lofts his ball before serving it.

"Mucus. Properly respected and unfingered, mucus has been designed, by God and his angels, to capture and conglomerate

germs and bodily grit. Its tasteful removal is the function of the handkerchief, not the finger. Pray observe. I take a folded red kerchief from my back pocket. I shake it out. It is clean, notice. I double-fold it—no thin fabric shall expose these fingers to the accidental taint of distasteful liquid—then I drape it over one hand. Now I bring it to my nose and close one nostril as I blow the other clear, back and forth, like this.”

Gregor gave two pronounced goose honks, followed by three short, quick ones, then wiped vigorously back and forth. The now-crumpled handkerchief he held before him like an offense.

“Thus is it done. The soiled cloth now goes carefully back into the pocket and, once I reach home, into the hamper, to be replaced by a clean, freshly-folded one.”

Master weaver Ludwig raised a hand. Gregor glared, refusing to acknowledge the questioner. Ludwig chimed in anyway: “But Gregor, where’s the harm? What matter whether handkerchief or finger removes the stuff so long as it’s removed? Did you really call us together for this?”

Gregor reddened. “You see?” he said, cutting off Ludwig’s last word. “*That’s* the attitude. Lax, lazy, insufficiently vigilant. Our master weaver picks his nose and eats what he has picked. Those same fingers, unwashed, take up the needle and handle bolts of cloth. Do you suffer under the illusion that Ludwig’s filthy nose products do not slime their way into his weave? What befouled toys does Santa place beneath children’s trees? Do you see? Do you see how pernicious and invasive an evil is spread by such acts? I tell you, my brother elves, we have devolved. This vile habit, which I have vowed to vanquish and to help all of you consign to the oblivion it deserves, cloaks some terrible truth about our past. Whatever its cause, this obscenity shall not stand. When I see it, I will call the offender on his folly. My brothers have vowed to do likewise.” Truth be told, fat Josef and Engelbert looked dubious. “Moreover, these meetings, to shame us and steel our resolve, shall continue until this scourge has been routed.”

Herbert’s guilt hung like lead in his eyes. If only Gregor knew the *half* of it, thought Fritz, he would go apoplectic.

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“You have been put on notice. I expect this ungodly practice to cease. Spy on one another. Spy on your unworthiest selves. Report offenders at once to Engelbert, Josef, or me. We shall shame them into surrender, I swear upon my sacred honor.”

And Gregor strode off, gesturing them back toward the dormitory. Amidst much murmuring, the elves took up the march, self-conscious now about their bodies. Gone the casual arm swing, the lax sway of hands alongside easy-breathing chests.

Shame hung heavy about Fritz, and worse, he saw, about his friend Herbert. I should feel anger, he thought, anger at the grumpmeister’s bullying and at Herbert’s dismay.

But all was shock and confusion within him.

* * *

Chuff, the Tooth Fairy’s lackluster youngest, sat forlorn in his least unfavorable spot, peering at the moon through a thicket of blighted trees halfway up the mountain’s west slope. The moon was cold and full and uncaring, its sheen the harsh, metallic glint in his brothers’ eyes when they sailed into him with tooth and claw.

“If I could only have a sign,” he said to the moon, so softly that only the odd syllable came out. Nonetheless, he lofted his eyes upward and said, “Please, the smallest sign. Something to assure me there’s more to life than this.” Chuff winced at memories of beatings and railings, of bad children running from him in terror as he obeyed his worst instincts. Lately, his self-loathing had increased. “I’m not like my brothers,” he said. “They sense it. So does Mom.”

At the thought of her, Chuff’s throat narrowed. She preferred her sons vicious. But Chuff found viciousness harder to conjure up with each passing day. She rewarded mayhem in the telling. Even when one of his brothers lied, and everyone knew he was embellishing his nasty deeds, Mom praised the liar.

When the blood of vengeance rode high in her, a certain nostril flare and lip curl distorted her looks. Chuff’s tales, contrive them though he might, never managed to please her. Hard and cold as her heart, she listened. If he escaped the telling without a scornful word or a command to the others to beat him senseless, he counted himself lucky. “She means well. No, that’s wrong. She never means

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well. I don't want her approval or praise. But I do. It's the coin of the realm, and dear pale moon—who at least, in your indifference, spares me your sneers—I sit here impoverished. Enrich me, or at least grant me minimal sustenance. There must be a way out, some way to...to find my true family, not these awful changelings.”

His brothers' scowls rose before him. He dismissed them, but they came again. Then he calmed and let them vanish into the chill air of the island.

“A sign. One small sign pointing the way out.”

But the moon's glare held steady. No wink. No warmth. No wavering. Clouds came in to cover it, until it was but a gray smudge hidden inside a darker gray.

For the longest time, Chuff tried to coax the moon back into view. It refused to return.

Santa Claus and stepdaughter Wendy strive to remake the world in compassion and generosity, preventing one child's fated suicide by winning over his worst tormentors, then attempting, with the Easter Bunny's help, to eradicate homophobia worldwide in one magical night.

Santa Claus Conquers the Homophobes

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