
A Lazy Afternoon *(Carleton Chinner)*



“Christmas this year didn’t quite turn out as planned,” says the guy next to me at the bar out of nowhere.

I’m not looking for conversation, but it’s too hot to move. Outside the cantilever balcony, the emerald rainforest tumbles down the hill into a sapphire sea. The scene is picture perfect, but after a week of me-time, the landscape is as boring as bat shit. I signal the waiter for two more beers and settle back in the bar stool. Far North Queensland is like that. Buy someone a beer and chances are good you’ll be entertained all afternoon.

“Grimnel’s the name,” he says “But all my friends call me G.” He takes a dew-beaded glass from the waiter with one stubby hand.

“That’s an odd name. Where’s it from?”

“Iceland. I’m from one of the original elf families.”

I try not to smile, not sure if he’s taking the piss or not. My companion is squat and dark-skinned, with odd cauliflower ears. If we’re going to play this game, I had to guess he was a hobbit.

“I thought elves were all like tall and gracious,”

G takes a swig of the beer.

“Nah, that’s just a rumour. Don’t believe all that romantic elf rubbish. I’m blue denim kind of elf.”

I follow his swig of beer. No sense in letting it get warm. Grimnel is going to keep me entertained all afternoon. “What happened at Christmas?”

It was the night before Christmas. So, me 'n the boys from the 407 local go and have a chat with Santa. See, s'not really fair that old Nick gets double time for making deliveries on Christmas Eve, while us hardworking folk from the toy workshop get single pay for the ten weeks before. I mean, how hard can it be to sit on the sleigh and deliver pressies?

"Santa gets this twinkle in his eye when we speaks to him, and there's a whole lot of ho, ho, ho. 'You want to ride the sleigh?' he says.

'Yeh' says me. I mean, I had to be forward, what with me being the shop steward and all.

Santa claps me on the shoulder and then he says "You ready to step up to the Turbo Sleigh 3000, boy?"

He's loud enough for the rest of the crew to hear so I gives him the look. Who does he think it was that waxed the runners on his fancy new runabout this morning?

We go down to the workshop, and there she is, gleaming, cherry-red sides and chrome tail jets. The present tray is already stacked to the clacker.

G goes off on a tangent about intercoolers and hyper-sleighs. I order another round before I stall him.

"What about Rudolf and Prancer, and the other reindeer?"

G looks over his half empty glass. His face has the smile of a good beer haze, but the eyes are a thousand years old.

"Loved those dumb fuzzies, I did. They used ta nuzzle me for a feed. Santa had to let them go during the GFC. Said something about downsizing and rightsized portions."

We stare out at the serenity of another perfect day in silence for a while until the rough-housing of lorikeets brawling through a gum tree breaks the mood and G continues.

“Santa gives me the talk.”

Don’t forget the naughty and nice list. Make sure every child gets a pressie. Always eat a cookie and drink a glass of milk. Blah, blah, blah.

I hops up on the stitched calf-leather running board. Nick loves the optional extras. The sleigh purrs when I touch the handrail, and we’re off. Old Nick has it sweet with the pre-programmed satnav and self-driving sleigh. I just have to sit there and dish out the goodies.

Sounds easy, but not the easiest job, y’know. You c’n only work under cover of darkness and there’s a lotta ground to cover. Santa’s got it all worked out. You starts in the Cook Islands and head west. The time zones give’s you a smidge over thirty-one hours of night, and the satnav gets you to all 90 million homes. Yeah, I know you there’s more people, but once you take out a whole lotta others faiths an all that, it works.

I spends all night diving down chimneys, eating cookies, and dishing out pressies. The present tray never gets empty until I’m standing in the moist pink of a Hawaiian sunrise with one last package in my hand.

I makes it back to the North pole and I’m tired enough to sleep on the doormat. If I never set eyes on another cookie, it’ll be too soon. Just the smell of chocolate chips gives me the dry heaves.

Ok, Santa, I says, that’s thirty-one hours at double time.

He gives that laugh. I coulda clocked him right there.

“You think you’re done, boy? You’ve still got the Greek Orthodox run next week. We can discuss your bonus when you complete the last delivery.”

G orders us another round. He slumps back, eyes half closed as he sips at the frosty ale.

“How’d you end up here, after that?” I ask, because I’m dying to know how this strange bloke ends the story.

He runs a hand through his thick mop of hair and takes in the elegant chrome and marble of the bar.

“Got busted for forgetting one envelope on my last run. No comebacks from that. No bonus and Instant dismissal.”

He reaches into a pocket and hauls out a grubby white envelope.

“This is it. Turns out it had an Australian Lotto ticket in it. Twenty mil solves a lot of problems for an out of work elf.”