

ANTA CLAUS OF ANTARCTICA Serialized



2. Carol Snow

Carol Snow lay awake in her wide four-poster bed. A moonbeam ran across her patchwork quilt. She stayed perfectly still, listening hard. Only the creaks and cricks an old house makes at night disturbed the silence.

Carol rubbed her eyes with her knuckles. She had a plan. If she fell asleep the plan would fail. Tonight, was Christmas Eve. Tonight, she would sneak out of this dreary house. Tonight, when she heard Santa Claus land on the roof, she would climb up there and sneak into the back of his sleigh. By the time Santa discovered her, it would be too late. The reindeer would have flown over the high wall surrounding her grandmother's house, and she would be free. She planned to hitch a ride with Santa all the way to Tierra Del Fuego where her parents were working on a dinosaur dig.

Everything Carol needed lay ready on her desktop, her blue down parka, her snow boots, her mittens, her stocking cap, and her passport.

"Won't Mom and Dad be surprised to see me," she said. "After Santa Claus drops me off, I'll hide behind a rock. I'll wait for the right moment. Then I'll leap out and shout, '*Merry Christmas.*'"

Carol's parents were paleontologists. They were digging for dinosaur bones at the southern tip of South America. For the past year, they had left their daughter with her grandmother in Connecticut.

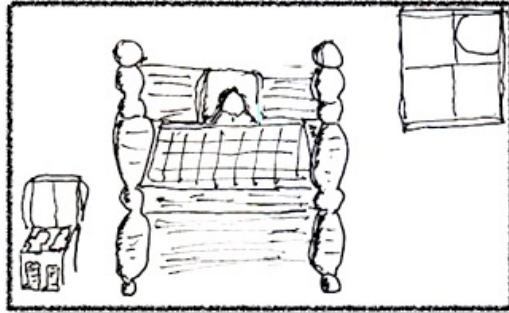
"Mom and Dad will hug and kiss me," Carol told herself. "They'll say how clever I was to find my own way to Tierra Del Fuego. They will never return me to this awful place."

Carol hated staying in her grandmother's big house. It was boring and lonely.

Her grandmother slept a lot. She never played with Carol or took her anywhere. She had forgotten what a young girl like to do and left Carol alone most of the time.

“I’ll be very good in Santa’s sleigh,” Carol said. “When the time is right, I’ll ask him nicely to take me to Tierra Del Fuego. How could he refuse? Since he flies everywhere in the world, he’d be going there anyway.”

Carol sat up in bed. What was that sound? Was that him? Did Santa’s sleigh just land on the roof? No, it was only her bedroom window rattling in the wind.



“He’ll be here soon,” she said. “Connecticut is a long way from the North Pole.”

Carol had sneaked out of the walled property twice before. The first time, she took a ladder from the gardener’s shed and climbed over the wall. She got halfway down the long driveway before Jinx, her grandmother’s Great Dane, spotted her and started barking.

“That was a naughty thing to do, Carol,” her grandmother said. “You are a sneak and being sneaky is not nice?”

Carol’s next escape attempt came when a green UPS delivery truck drove through the tall iron gates. Carol waited for the UPS man to carry a package to the front door before she climbed into the back of the truck and hid behind a large box. The driver was a mile down the road before Carol sneezed and gave herself away.

“Naughty, naughty,” her grandmother scolded. “A naughty girl shouldn’t expect any presents for Christmas.”

Carol’s eyelids slowly drooped. They popped back open. She mustn’t fall asleep. For the dozenth time, she went over the escape plan in her head. The timing was important. The moment she heard Santa’s sleigh land on the roof, she would count to one hundred. That would give Santa enough time to grab his toy sack, walk to the chimney and drop down into the fireplace. That’s when she would make her move. She had practiced this many times. While Santa unloaded her presents, she would climb out her bedroom window onto the narrow ledge beneath it. From there

she would climb up the fire escape ladder to the roof. Before Santa returned, she would sneak inside his sleigh and crouch low in the back seat.

“At first, Santa will be too busy to notice a small girl inside his sleigh,” she said. “But he’s the kindest man in the world. He would never return me to this house.”

Carol rolled over and faced the bedroom window. Outside, spiky icicles pointed down from the gutters. A round blotchy moon appeared outside the glass.

“That’s the same moon Mom and Dad are seeing tonight in Tierra Del Fuego,” she said. “By tomorrow morning, I’ll be standing by their side.” Christmas Eve, Mr. Anta Claus sat in his workshop before a crackling fireplace. Flickers of firelight danced upon the braided rug and shelf-lined walls. Whiffs of pine, gingerbread, and peppermint floated by.

Anta Claus, dressed in soft gray long johns, rocked thoughtfully in his wooden rocking chair. His blotchy, red cheeks were proof of his recent return from the outside cold. Steam rose from his stocking feet that stretched onto the hearth.

In one hand Anta held a stick of black licorice and in the other a long list that he studied with interest. He placed the licorice between his lips and raised a black quill pen that he used to dash off a check mark on the curling sheet of paper. He nodded approvingly and did it again.

Fixing his spectacles more firmly on the end of his nose, he said “Right. I got those and that. I got this and these. I’ve taken the toys from Tasmania and every strip of tinsel from Tahiti.”

With a broad stroke of his pen, he added more checks to the list. “I’ve collected the candy canes from Cape Town and the fruitcakes from the Falklands. Oh! Oh! Oh! Can’t let anything slip by.”

In the back of the workshop, Mr. Anta Claus’s two trolls, Tis and Twas, worked frantically to dismantle, crunch, flatten, smash, and rip apart the piles of decorations and toys Anta had collected that evening.

No doubt there was plenty of work left to do. Every shelf in the room was full. Stacks of dollhouses stood in one corner. A heap of remote-control cars lay in another. Miles of colored Christmas-light strings rolled into bales, lined the back wall, while countless stars, plucked from the tops of countless evergreens, dangled from the ceiling.

Mr. Anta Claus stroked his black whiskers and took a bite of licorice. Without lifting his eyes off the list, he addressed the two trolls. “Make sure you fellows break those toys in little bitty bits. Don’t want any trace of Christmas left around here tomorrow.”

“Understand, Mac,” answered Tis, who was busy busting glass tree ornaments with a large nutcracker.

“Will do, Mac,” answered Twas, who was sanding the red stripes off a stack of candy canes.

“Right,” said Anta, returning to his checking. “Let me see now. I got this and that. I got those and these. I grabbed the mistletoe from Madagascar and the eggnog from Ecuador. And, Oh! Oh! Oh!, I completely undecorated Rio de Janeiro.”

So it went, on through the evening, check mark after check mark, until Mr. Anta Claus came to the last item on his list. Here he paused.

“Hmmm, Tierra del Fuego?” he said. “Now did I or did I not take all the fir trees from Tierra del Fuego?”

Again he called to his helpers. “Hey, fellows! Have you come across any trees from Tierra del Fuego yet? I can’t remember if I took them this year.”

“Nope, Mac,” replied Tis, who was melting down a patch of plastic dolls in an big kettle.

“We save Christmas tree slicing for last, Mac,” answered Twas, who shoveled another load of toy guns into a jumbo meat grinder. They emerged from the other end appearing like hamburger meat.

“Great bother, this,” Mr. Anta Claus muttered through his whiskers. “I’d better fly over that land to double-check. Must be thorough.”

Leaning forward in his rocker, he peered out the workshop window. Snow fell. A stiff wind sent each snowflake into loop the loops before it could touch the ground.

Anta chomped on the licorice stick and rose from his chair. “Great bother, that too. A nasty storm is brewing out there.”

Then, grumbling each step of the way, the skinny man strode from the room.