

ANTA CLAUS OF ANTARCTICA Serialized



9. Rest Stop

Gracefully, the eight yaks landed on the snow-covered lake. The black sleigh slid to a stop behind them. South Wind stopped blowing, and the pine trees along the lakeshore stood still and silent. An owl hooted. A wolf howled.

Anta pulled his thermos and two mugs from under his seat. He poured Carol and himself a mug of hot cocoa. Two marshmallows floated on the top of each one.

Carol took a sip. The cocoa spread warmth to the tip of her toes.

“Mmmmm,” she said. “Yummy.”

“Tis and Twas make the best hot cocoa in the world,” said Anta. “They use an ancient troll recipe.”

Anta looked up. He pointed at the North Star. As he did, other stars shot across the sky. They left golden trails behind them.

“Shooting stars,” Carol said. “They bring good luck.”

“And they draw excellent sky maps,” Anta said.

Anta kept pointing, and more stars shot from one side of the sky to the other. To Carol’s amazement, the golden lines formed a map. In the middle of the map, one star blinked brightly.

“A map of Canada,” Carol said. “A stellar GPS.”

“That blinking star, Betelgeuse, is our current position,” said Anta.

“We’re not far from Hudson Bay,” Carol said.

“Oh! Oh! You know your geography,” said Anta.

“It’s my favorite subject at school. I like reading maps.”

Anta nodded. “South Wind blew us far off course,” he said. “She certainly was trying to tell us something.”

“You sound like you know the winds,” said Carol.

“When you fly around the world as much as I do, you get to know the Four

Winds very well,” said Anta. “South Wind, for instants, the wind that blew us here, has a temper. Oh! Oh! As you saw, you don't want to be around South Wind when she blows her stack. By now, I'm happy to say, South Wind has blown herself out and gone home.”

“Home? The Four Winds have a home?” Carol said. “Where? Where do they live?”

“On Null Island, a tiny island off the coast of West Africa,” Anta said. “It sits in the Atlantic Ocean precisely at 0° latitude, 0° longitude. That's the spot where the Prime Meridian crosses the Equator.”

“Null Island?” Carol said. “I've never seen it on any world map. It must be teeny.”

“No larger than a desktop,” Anta said. He unrolled the Naughty List and looked toward the stars. “Now I need to plot a new delivery route across North America.”

“And I'll treat the yaks to some snowballs,” said Carol.

She hopped from the sleigh. She packed eight snowballs and fed one to each yak. While she worked, she glanced toward the shoreline. Blinking yellow eyes peered out from the dark forest. She quickly returned to Anta's side.

“Tell me more about the Christmas Lists, Anta,” she said. “You said the Four Winds decide what names go on your Naughty List and what names go on Santa's Nice List. Santa's list must be a lot longer.”

“Oh! Oh! Much longer,” said Anta. “Tonight, Santa Claus will visit many more houses than I will. But, of course, his job is much more pleasant. Children everywhere look forward to his arrival.”

Carol took a sip of cocoa. Cautiously she asked, “So, once a name is on the Naughty List, can it switch to the Nice List?”

“It happens, but not often,” Anta said. “The Four Winds are always listening.”

“How?” Carol asked. “How do children get off the Naughty List?”

“Naughty boys and girls are naughty in their own way,” said Anta. “So, each child switches lists differently. But children must find the way before the first ray of sunlight on Christmas morning. That way, Santa has time to fly to their houses and replace my gifts.”

Again, Carol looked toward the shoreline. The blinking eyes belonged to dozens of forest animals that had walked out onto the lake. They circled the sleigh—large elk, white snow hares, gangly moose, flat-tailed beavers, bobcats, black bears,

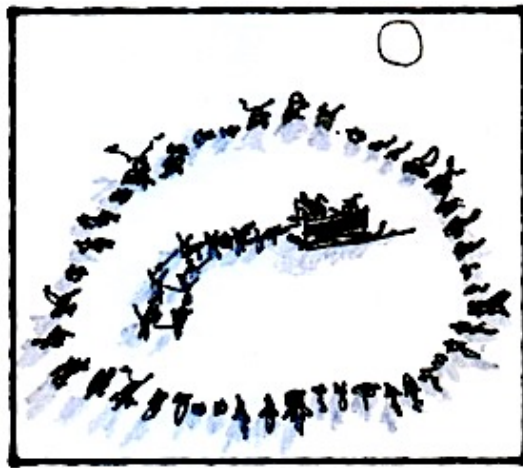
and a pack of timber wolves. In the silvery moonlight, every detail of every creature was clear.

Carol grabbed Anta's arm. "Do you see them?" she asked.

"Always good to have visitors," Anta said. He waved a mittened hand and called out, "Come nearer, friends. Come meet Carol Snow from Connecticut."

The forest animals stepped closer to the sleigh. The ring tightened. When they were a few yards away, they stopped and sat on the snow. Two snowy owls flew up and perched on the edge of the sleigh. The large white owls stared at Carol with big yellow eyes.

"*Whoo! Whoo!*"



Carol took another sip of hot cocoa. She studied the forest animals surrounding her. Not one of them stirred; not one of them made a sound. They sat there as if waiting to hear a story.

At length, Carol asked Anta, "How did you get into the Christmas delivery business. Where did your trolls and yaks come from? When did the Naughty List start arriving at the South Pole?"

"Oh! Oh!" said Anta. "I haven't told the story in a long time. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

Carol leaned back in her seat. Again, she checked the ring of creatures.

"I sure would," she said. "Your audience is ready."

Anta smiled through his whiskers. He began his tale, "Once upon a time...or as we say in Antarctica...Once *under* a time when I was young..."