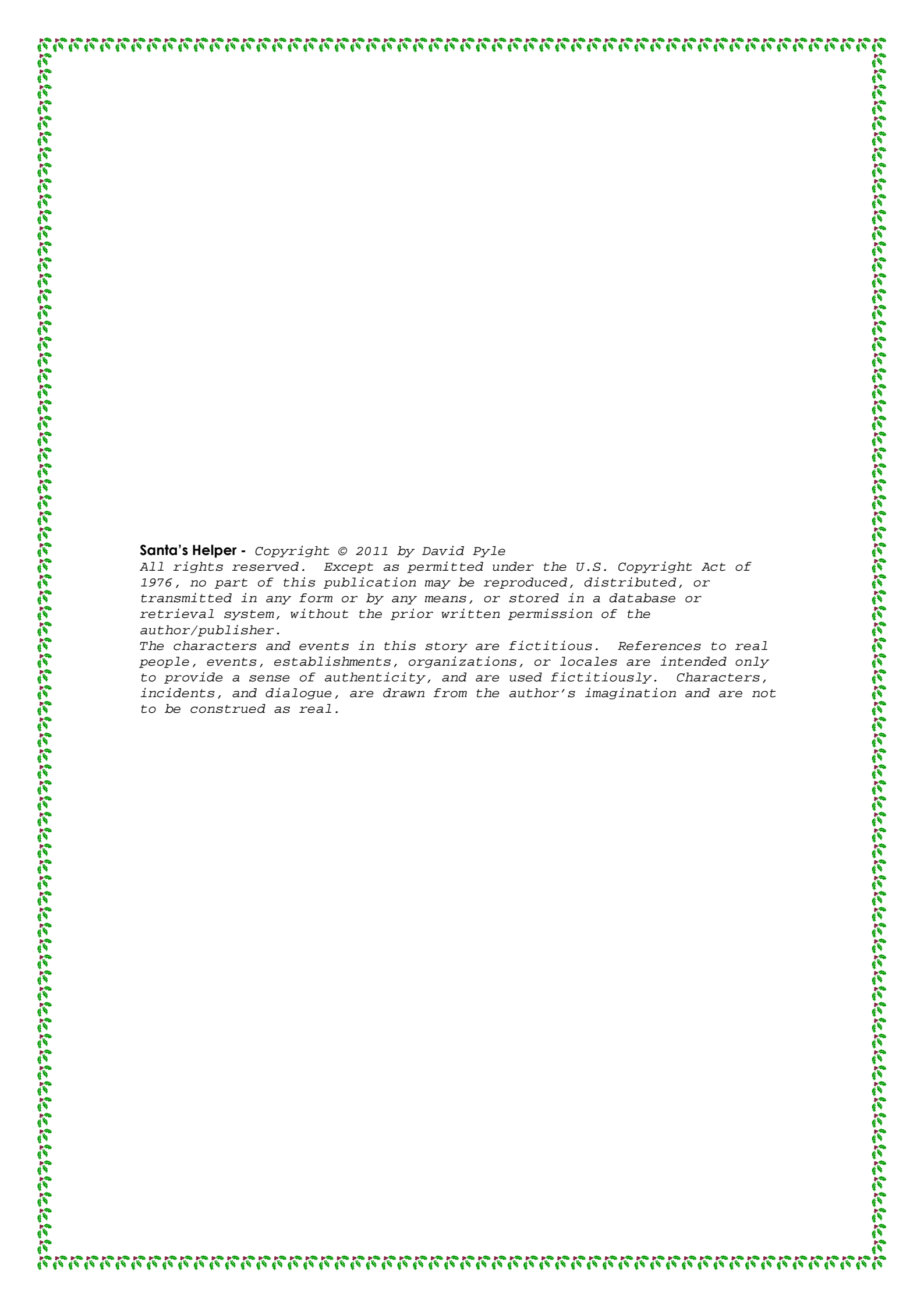




Santa's Helper

By David Pyle



Santa's Helper - Copyright © 2011 by David Pyle

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the author/publisher.

The characters and events in this story are fictitious. References to real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales are intended only to provide a sense of authenticity, and are used fictitiously. Characters, incidents, and dialogue, are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real.



The long gruffy white beard, tainted by remnant streaks of rat-piss yellow, shook with laughter. This one looked like all the other beards standing on street corners across the city, donning dingy red and white Santa suits, except this beard was real.

"It feels so good to get to breathe the smog again," said Luccinda, with almost silent keening laughter.

Her tiny feet were tap, tap, tapping; trying to keep up with her Santa, arm looped through his for balance, a little dizzy from hunger. The semi-frozen slop on the sidewalk was already a charcoal gray from the day's traffic, crunching and spitting under their feet.

"Promise me you won't let them put me back inside?" she whined, "Promise me?"

His glowing red cheeks and bright blue eyes turned and looked down at her slim face. He shook his head making the bell on the furry cap jingle, "Not alive, Sweets."

His voice was so deep it vibrated against her shoulder; it always brought her comfort. She crunched his arm warmly and turned her cold face against his coat to ease the chill on her nose, smiling.

Her skimpy red and white fur suit barely made its way to her slim thighs, showing lots of leg. Their suits actually looked as good on them as the original owners, now lying face down beside the employee entrance of Macy's twenty blocks away.

"How much you got stuffed in your pocket?"

She slid her hand in the one deep slot on the side of her suit and felt around all the paper bills, trying to count them in their dark secret place.

"Feels like a couple hundred," she whispered.

"My donor must have been on the way to buy presents; I think I have a little over eight. Let's get out of this cold and go deck the halls, Sweets."

A car honked its horn as they stepped from the curb to cross the street, making Luccinda chirp and grapple tightly onto Granger's solid arm; the same arm which had easily clubbed the two Macy's employees to the ground late last night.



The crime scene photographer's flashes bounced off the back of Detective Johnson's retinas for the umpteenth time; what a way to start your morning. Despite the lack of sleep and the encroaching migraine, he couldn't seem to look away from the carnage. He never quite got used to seeing senseless death no matter what category they filtered down to in the filing system.

The two bodies lay in their underwear, stiff not only from rigor mortis, but from the sunless frigid air behind Macy's. In the sunshine, the quarter inch or so of body fat might have thawed..., eventually.

"How did they manage to lay here for twelve hours without anyone seeing them?"

There was no one there to answer his rhetoric, but it didn't matter; he was asking himself, watching the steam from his breath dissipate in the cold air.

"Morning Dick-tective Johnson."

Johnson winced at the familiar voice of his partner as his feet slid and scooted against the film of ice up to the police line.

"Merry Christmas to you too."

"Think they were dragged over here or were they getting in a little smoochie time before they clocked out?"

Johnson didn't answer Morgan's callously worded question. The one thing that kept them from bonding as humans was Bill Morgan's rejection of the human condition.

"No drag marks. They were probably talking when they were knocked down."

The coroner grunted as he flipped the body of the man over, his nearly six foot frame in a frozen pose similar to one of the manikins in Macy's front store window. It fell with a hard thud onto its back. There were immediate flashes of a bulky camera and some mumbling.

Morgan spun his body around in a slow three hundred sixty degrees.

"Hmm, no eyes on this area."

"Noted, Morgan. The manager played back the only parking lot video. These two walked past the security cam, joined hands and disappeared."

Morgan sneered, "Like I said, smoochie time."

This time Johnson ignored him.

"For a couple of dollars and their clothes; senseless."

Like it ever made sense to see a cold lifeless body.

"Hell of a thing. Took away all they were and all they ever would be," whispered Morgan, in a dry flat tone.

Johnson whipped his head around in anger at his partner, too appalled to respond.

"What? Don't look at me like that. It was a loose quote."

Pathetic; quoting Clint from one of his westerns over two emptied souls on the parking lot pavement.

"A little respect?"

"Think it was the 'A's' from West 132nd Street? This is their turf."

The 'A's' were the closest gang in the area. A mixed bunch with no culture lines for membership, harder to track.

"It's possible. Why take their clothes?"

Johnson looked up at his partner, his knees suddenly aching from his crouch.

"The store manager said they were both new here. He was their Santa and she was his helper."

"You mean someone stole their Santa costumes?"

Morgan sipped at the steam from his hot cup of coffee thoughtfully.

“Could'a been some homeless bum looking for a coat. It got pretty cold last night. It's pretty cold right now.”

He was right. Cold and hunger were two of the strongest motivators for crime this time of year. It was the first useful conjecture from his mouth since he arrived but Johnson didn't look up.

The coroner easily flipped the small body of the woman and eased it down. The skin on both her palms was frozen to the pavement and some peeled off in little raw patches. The cold and lividity made her look as if she were still pressed against some invisible glass wall. Morgan stared at the young girl's flattened bra in awe.

“What a waste.”

“Aw..., Morgan....”

Johnson looked blisteringly up at his partner and stood slowly.

“Here Johnson, take your coffee before it freezes.”



“Did you see the look on that guy's face?”

Luccinda's grin was twisted just a little too high on one side; a stroke, medications or shock treatments, whatever the reason, it never seemed to even out anymore.

Granger grunted and gave her a quick nod, sounding more like the growl of a beast.

“Got to make people respect you, Sweets. You got a lot to learn.”

He lifted her as easily as a small child onto the second step leading up into the busy restaurant. They were almost eye level to each other with the sudden difference in height. He pulled her waist closer and she gave him a quick kiss.

“Remember; don't flash any large cash in front of anybody. Don't do anything to make them remember you; blend in. That's rule one.”

She nodded and took his arm as they stepped in line to be seated, feeling the warm air streaming across her face. No one gave them

more than a parting glance, assuming they were either going or coming from work or a party. Everyone trusts Santa and his helper.

They hadn't been seated more than ten minutes, sipping their drinks with eyes roving discretely in every direction, when a youngster walked right up to their table.

"Santa!"

Luccinda jolted from the unexpected intrusion.

"Can I give you my list?"

Granger placed his hand on Luccinda's to calm her agitation.

"What can Santa do for you young man?"

The deep rumbling voice frightened the boy and Granger quickly let out a chuckle and smiled with his bright blue eyes.

"Uh..., I wanted to ask you..., I mean..., " he stuttered.

"Tell you what. I can see the cat's got your tongue. Why don't you write down your list and bring it over before you leave?"

The boy smiled and nodded profusely trotting across the restaurant to the other side where his parents were seated. Granger eyed the boy's every step closely until he was seated. Seconds later, the boy's parents looked up, then over at where they were seated.

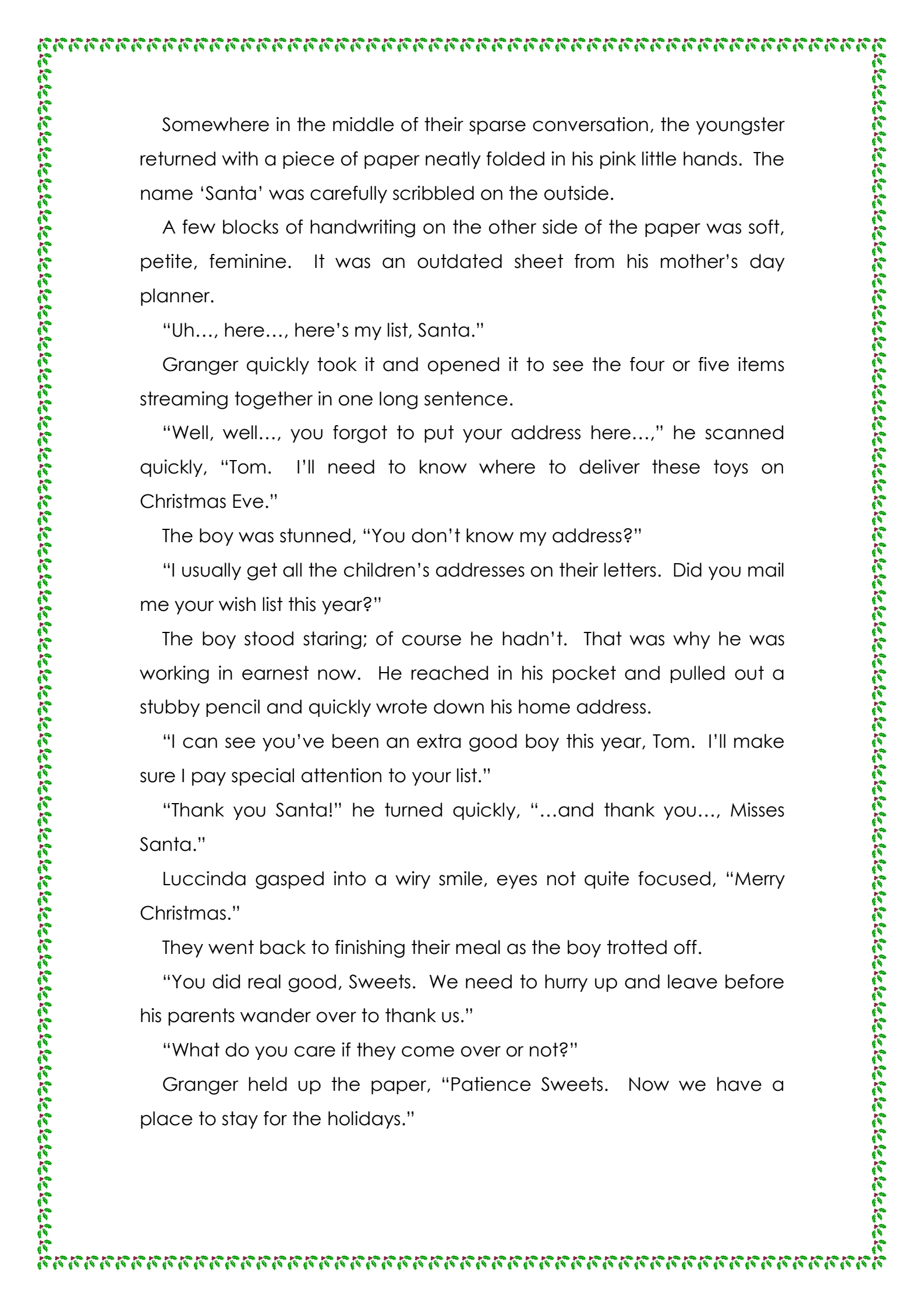
Granger waved and nodded. Instantly they responded in kind.

"I think we have a nibble on our line, Sweets."

She hadn't broken her stare at Granger since the startling voice of the child.

"Remember to smile, don't look so scared Sweets. You're Santa's helper."

She took an inadvertently long time registering her instructions before the white thin line of her lips relaxed and grew back their soft rosy pink complexion. He patted her hand and she settled the furrows across her brow just as their waiter began delivering food.



Somewhere in the middle of their sparse conversation, the youngster returned with a piece of paper neatly folded in his pink little hands. The name 'Santa' was carefully scribbled on the outside.

A few blocks of handwriting on the other side of the paper was soft, petite, feminine. It was an outdated sheet from his mother's day planner.

"Uh..., here..., here's my list, Santa."

Granger quickly took it and opened it to see the four or five items streaming together in one long sentence.

"Well, well..., you forgot to put your address here..., " he scanned quickly, "Tom. I'll need to know where to deliver these toys on Christmas Eve."

The boy was stunned, "You don't know my address?"

"I usually get all the children's addresses on their letters. Did you mail me your wish list this year?"

The boy stood staring; of course he hadn't. That was why he was working in earnest now. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a stubby pencil and quickly wrote down his home address.

"I can see you've been an extra good boy this year, Tom. I'll make sure I pay special attention to your list."

"Thank you Santa!" he turned quickly, "...and thank you..., Misses Santa."

Luccinda gasped into a wiry smile, eyes not quite focused, "Merry Christmas."

They went back to finishing their meal as the boy trotted off.

"You did real good, Sweets. We need to hurry up and leave before his parents wander over to thank us."

"What do you care if they come over or not?"

Granger held up the paper, "Patience Sweets. Now we have a place to stay for the holidays."

Slow reasoning filled her erratic thoughts as she nodded and then began inhaling her food in half-chewed gulps.



The address was all the way over in Lincoln Park; nowhere near the run down neighborhood where the Good Samaritan Sanatorium was nestled. A good neighborhood..., and a very long walk to the ferry to get across the river.

"Can we cut through the park?" asked Luccinda, "I haven't been there since I was fifteen."

Granger turned, changing their course, "Of course we can, Sweets."

Twisted thoughts began to flash across his mind as they strolled through the dwindling winter sun. A few people strolled by arm in arm struggling against the cold as well as a sporadic few in jogging suits slapping the pavement trying to avert an early heart attack from the stress of city life.

It was nearly dusk when the odd looking couple reached the other side of Central Park, just a peek at the view of Manhattan.

Granger stopped and surveyed the area for only a moment.

A couple walked past them without giving them the slightest glance. Granger noticed their size, their height, that they were not holding hands, but following along beside each other like strangers. No smiling chatter, no brisk stepped pace, a loveless couple on their way to nowhere.

Quickly, he turned pulling Luccinda into an obedient step beside him and began to follow them.

He took careful account of their long trench coats, the size of their stride, and their lack of peripheral attention. His head spun in all directions. No one else was close.

Granger whispered almost lovingly, softly..., into Luccinda's ear.

“When the man goes down, get behind the woman and hold her..., tight.”

Excitement and adrenaline made her shake as gooseflesh crawled down her aching cold bare legs and up the back of her neck.

They moved in tandem quietly just as Granger lifted his arm high behind the man's head.

New York never stuttered as the man's mind was relieved of his worries over some stock portfolio, or was it possibly his failed marriage, or another woman he was secretly pining over, ...it probably wasn't Christmas presents.

The expensively clad gentleman hit the ground, neck shattered, dead, before he exhaled his last breath.

“Ho, ho, ho....”

The woman barely gasped, about to suck in two wet sacks full of ice cold air to scream when Luccinda quickly stepped behind her and crushed her arms around the woman's waist.

Granger's stone knuckles mated with the side of the woman's delicate cheek and she no longer had to begrudge what her husband was silently mulling over in the privacy of his thoughts.

Granger lifted the wilted woman's body from Luccinda and lightly tossed her into the bushes before quickly turning to the limp body of the man. Granger's eyes scanning every direction.

He snatched at an arm up and lifted the dead weight like a sack of groceries. There would be no drag marks, no blood splatter, only death.

“Put on her coat, Sweets; you're cold.”

Luccinda quickly yanked off the barely breathing woman's ankle length overcoat and slipped it on. Oh..., how it felt so good..., still warm..., reminding her of nights as a child when her mother would bring her a warmed blanket to help her sleep. Her mother was long gone, barely a memory.

“Pretty...,” she whispered as she wriggled three diamond encrusted rings from the woman’s fingers and slid them on her own. A perfect fit, all of them.

“Knees in her back, grab the chin with your right hand and push the back of her head with your left..., quick and hard Sweets.”

Luccinda always amazed Granger at the amount of strength in her deceptively small body. It was the main reason he chose her from dozens of others before they escaped from their cuckoo’s nest only three days ago. Her attractive figure was only an added bonus.

He smiled when heard the familiar crunching snap and Luccinda stood straddle the idle body of the dead woman, her eyes already blank as a codfish.

“That was perfect, Sweets.”

Granger pulled her to him, gently kissing her vibrating lips until she exhaled the last of the adrenaline and relaxed. He took the man’s coat and slipped it on, stretching it obscenely over his bulky Santa suit. Time for a change.

Luccinda looked down at the two bodies thoughtfully, “Should we put them together? Maybe lay her in his arms?”

Granger fished out the man’s wallet and looked at the same scene, trying to envision what Sweets was seeing in her skewed minds eye.

Finally, “No..., he didn’t love her.”

She looked more thoughtfully now into Granger’s eyes and back down.

“No. I guess not. Not like you love me.”

He smiled, “Not like I love you, Sweets.”



“Guess we found our missing Santa suits. Way the hell over in Central.... Who would have guessed?”

The Christmas costumes were what triggered the call to drag the two detectives away from their families in the middle of the night and into the adjacent precinct. So much for departmental courtesy.

Morgan paced back and forth, looking and thinking.

"Guess that rules out the A's, huh?"

Johnson stared at the obscenity of the view, praying his partner wouldn't make another insensitive jackass comment.

The dead man was seated on the park bench in a blank stare, dressed only in the Santa suit, head carefully balanced by a Y-shaped stick from his belly to his chin. A woman was carefully posed on the other end of the bench in the seductive little red and white Helper's suit, head lolled forward at a grotesque angle. Her legs were no match for the ones of the previous owner, but neither of the detectives would ever know that.

"The M-O's different. All except for the clothes. Think it's the same perp?"

Morgan wiped his palm over his balding head in contemplation, "Or maybe there're more than two of them. Think we got a homeless group that's snapped?"

Johnson nodded in silent agreement.

"Here sit John and Jane Doe in their Santa suits. Why do we always get the crazies?"

Johnson grinned silently, pondering the thought processes of his senior partner. Weren't all senseless acts of violence crazy? What made this one more crazy in Morgan's eyes?

"My wife was really p-o'd when I got the call," said Johnson, snapping a look at his wristwatch, "When's the coroner getting here?"

"On his way.... My Julie gave me a great kiss and a slap on the butt. She keeps my life insurance policy paid up and doesn't hide her feelings."

Johnson stood back, not wanting to disturb the crime scene until the other boys finished their job.

"Why the stick on him...," Morgan said pointing at the corpse, "...and she's...."

He began looking around.

"Look. Whoever did it tried to prop her up too. See this stick?"

There was a smaller stick with a Y on one end that was stripped and bent, tossed beside the victim on the ground at the end of the park bench.

"Hmmm..., either they couldn't make the head balance or something spooked them. Maybe we got a witness we don't know about yet? Who found the bodies?"

Morgan shrugged, "Everybody from the 23rd Precinct scattered when they found out it was handed off to us. Guess we'll have to wait for the reports."

"I can't blame them, ...three days 'til Christmas."

Another set of emergency lights flickered in the distance alerting them to the arrival of the coroner or yet another set of eyes.

"Calvary's here."

Morgan flicked his mag-light at the dead man's hands and squatted on the sidewalk in front of the bench.

"Dirt under the fingernails and around the cuticles. Blue collar worker? Haircut looks a little too clean. Her hair looks like forty bucks a week at a salon. Maybe just a Christmas-do to look nice for a party?"

Her hands are the same, like they were scrubbed and rolled in the dirt maybe?"

Johnson looked closely, flicking his light at odd angles.

"No, her nails look like they were kept manicured. Don't see any rings on either of them. Don't see any creases on the ring fingers. Is that some new trick to hide ring marks?"

Morgan grinned, "It's not shake-n-bake."

Quickly moving footsteps broke their chain of thought and they stood back as the coroner arrived with a photographer on his heels.

Morgan glanced back at the man in the Santa suit, winced and turned his head to Johnson, "I don't like him staring at me."



The ice-cold wind whipped Luccinda's sandy blond hair as she held tightly to the rail of the nine o'clock ferry. She reached into an inside pocket of her new warm coat and pulled out a pair of soft cream colored gloves and slipped them easily over her fingers.

"Never been on the ferry before," she muttered, almost to herself. The lights of Manhattan were getting closer by the minute, their reflection glowing in her eyes, twinkling like birthday candles. She didn't like the darkness of the water rushing past and pulled herself closer to Grangers side.

As soon as the ferry docked, he aimed their trek in the general direction of the address he held closely in his pocket.

"We'll get you a bite to eat in a minute or two, Sweets. Let's go in here first."

Granger nudged her toward a corner drugstore and they walked inside, rich smells in the air, cheerful holiday music blaring. The aisle where he steered them was full of Clairol and Nice-n-Easy; their shiny faces smiling stupidly back at them. He held up one box next to Luccinda like an artisan would a color palette.

"You don't like my blond hair?"

"I love your blond hair, Sweets. This is only temporary. What color do you like?"

He picked up a box with a dark auburn shade for his own hair. Across the aisle, he inspected a pair of electric clippers, stuffed them under his arm and added a pack of razors to the collection.

"How's this?"

Luccinda held the box beside her twisted little grin, trying her best to imitate the frozen image on the box of chestnut brown hair dye.

“Good. Let's pay up and go eat.”

The deli just down the street welcomed them inside along with the massive throng of last minute Christmas shoppers. Luccinda was already starving after the long walk and her feet thanked her as she sat down with her warm sandwich.

Granger took his time milling around the crowd, filling their drinks at the self-serve kiosk. His ever diligent eyes were in constant scan of those at an arms length away, the traffic coming in the front door, and anyone that might be watching him.

Luccinda had just relaxed enough to unwrap her food before she felt a hand touch her shoulder and she froze mid-bite, turning her head in a shiver.

“Oh, I'm sorry hun, didn't mean to startle you. I was just admiring your coat.”

The smiling face of a lady seated in the booth behind her, mid-forties, tired at the corners, scooted sideways to talk without straining.

Granger slid down in the booth across from Luccinda, sat down their drinks and swished his long coat to the side.

“My husband got it for me. I'm glad you like it,” she said glancing back at Granger.

“Wish my husband would get me one like that. Cheap asshole. You don't know how lucky you are.”

Granger smiled and took a drink, letting his blue eyes gleam.

“Yeah, I do,” said Luccinda, “He gets me anything I want.”

“Wish my husband was here to take note, well..., Merry Christmas to you both.”

She spun back around, flowing back into the kingdom of anonymous faces on every side.

Luccinda finished her bite, then most of her sandwich before they trudged out onto the cold sidewalk.

"You're a natural, Sweets."

She took the comment as a compliment and scrubbed closer to his side.

"Is it much farther? My feet are killing me."

"See that tall building sticking up over there? That's where we're headed."

The pain in her feet dissipated with an end to their journey in sight. A blast of warm air circled them as a door opened and closed, warm smell of fresh pretzels and rich coffee tickling their noses. Everywhere they walked seemed to be alive for the first time in her life.

In what seemed only minutes, they were in an elevator rising to the sixth floor of the apartment building.

Apartment 606 was soon staring them in the face; a cheerful holly bough hanging on tightly to the door.

"Just remember to do what I said, Sweets."

Granger stood to the side of the door when Luccinda rang the buzzer.


The door cracked open slowly and then flooded wide.

"Misses Santa!"



Granger stepped around the brightly decorated Christmas tree and swung open the shades to the view of the street down below. His face felt cold and prickly, even in the warmth of the apartment as he splayed coarse fingertips across his bare chin.

Luccinda walked beside him with a cup of hot coffee and reached up to feel Grangers smooth cheeks. He looked nothing like she imagined beneath the stained white beard.



The noise and lights of the city drew her attention and she looked down at the street below. Luccinda felt as if someone decided to turn on the lights and open the door just for her, for them.

People were everywhere in streams, shoulder to shoulder, wearing their isolation blinders, oblivious to everyone else.

Granger understood how to use their oblivion, knead it like fresh dough with the fingers of his mind, and found their disjunctured loopholes inviting.

"I hear San Francisco is nice this time of the year, Sweets."

She nodded and gave him a kiss.

He fully intended to keep his promise to Luccinda. Neither of them would ever see the inside of any institution ever again..., not alive.

The End

Visit pentwist.com for info on more stories.