

And to all a good night!

By Susan McLaughlin

He'd bought the DeLorean on eBay. It was over-priced, but he'd had no choice. He'd needed a flux capacitor and Bunning's had sold out in the latest round of panic buying. Toilet paper. Flux capacitors. Ivermectin and pickled onions. Who knew repeated pandemics could cause such madness? He'd been wiping his arse with his hat for the past week, using melted snow to wash it after every session.

The elves had gone on strike for the last time. They'd raised a stilted tent city around the sinking toy factory and leaned into their victimhood. Rising damp. Rising anger. Left him no choice in the end. He'd had to replace them with robots. Foreseeable. So foreseeable. But was it avoidable?

And the quarantine requirements had kept ramping up, especially in the island nations: New Zealand, Australia, the nation formerly known as Taiwan. More paperwork. And more jobs. More fiery hoops to squeeze through. A self-driving moonlight-powered sleigh became Santa's only option. Couldn't get the reindeers across the borders, you see.

Hell, no-one had feed for them anyway. Failed crops, piracy, black market extortionists; world wars are a messy business. Three failed appeals on the crowdfunding sites had sealed the deer's fate in the end. Santa had sold his entire herd to the Saudis just last Tuesday. The sheiks were gagging for some gambling revenue. Camel racing had been banned for decades. Methane emissions. Broken legs. Backroom betting rorts. Given time, the rent-a-crowd activists would surely shut down the flying races too, but the wheels of bureaucracy turn slowly in the desert and the Arabs hoped to get a few years of excited betting in before they turned Rudolf into kofta

for the tourists. Santa wished them luck: the sheiks and the tourists. And, of course, poor big-nosed Rudolph. How would he cope with the heat? And the UV rays on his shiny honker?

For a brief time Santa had considered keeping Blitzen. He'd always held a soft spot for the buck he'd raised from infancy, bottle fed after its mother rejected it at birth. And Mary doted on the blighter. But in the end, it all seemed a bit pointless. The sanctions. The blockades. It was just too hard to get the feed, despite Santa's many contacts and padded envelopes to the highest officials. Bit coins, dark webs, detours and work arounds. None of them successful. Even a discrete call to the Russian mafia couldn't bring about a solution. It was all just too hard. Too damned hard. Like everything these days.

And didn't Blitzen deserve a happy end? Better to fly free with his mates, blissfully ignorant, for a few more years, than stay here and deal with... with...

Santa sighed wearily as another solar storm hit, causing yet another outage and mesmerising auroras. “*%#&ing mesmerising!” Santa swore sarcastically. How was he going to retro-fit this flux capacitor if he couldn't watch the instructional videos on YouTube?

At least the blackout brought a halt to the incessant banging of the construction crews. The noise had been doing Santa's head in.

Elon had bought the factory late last month for a song. An expensive song, admittedly, but a song none-the-less. He was the only one with deep enough pockets. Eighteen American Dollars deep - with nine eggs following - to be exact. Elon planned to turn the complex into a three-way transport hub. Under-sea train tunnels. International plane flights. Mars Mission launch pads for his burgeoning intergalactic empire. Grand Centralised Station.

What's north of the North Pole? Mars, it seems.

A sprawling hotel complex would be part of the monstrosity, with the obligatory retail, hospitality and casino attachments. A one-stop shop for the billionaire explorers. A last ditch 'boys weekend' before they went off to explore the universe with their beautiful - and underaged? - ingénues. The Berlin of World War III. Babylon revisited.

Elon had already shored up the sinking foundations and supplied Santa's robots with the latest software updates. A ten-year lease and transition phase was written into the contract, signed and witnessed by an entourage of parasitic lawyers on both sides. Ten short years. Ten short, yet overly long and wearying, years. A decade of delay, to allow Santa time to look for other premises, whilst Elon converted his fantasy future into a present reality. Even the elves had been offered salvation in the form of re-training and employment. They'd need to be patient, of course, but there would eventually be work for any who were willing and/or able to swallow humble pie. Baggage handlers. Retail staff. Hospitality workers and croupiers. And the in-flight meals would need to be prepared somewhere. Why not on-site?

The toy factory would be converted in the final stages of the re-fit. Conveyor belts. Commercial kitchens. Zero-emission freezers in the ice below the factory. Elon had it all planned out. Was he trying to assuage his guilt? Overwhelming soul-crushing existential guilt: the foreseeable response to Neuralink and the world-wide unemployment that had followed its deployment? Who knew? Who knew what was in the mind of someone like Elon Musk? Certainly not Santa.

He might know when you are sleeping. He might know when you're awake. But he could not read a trillionaire's mind. He could not, for heaven's sake!

Eighteen Billion American Dollars. Hooo-eee, what a song. What an extraordinary song. It blew Santa's socks off. And his boots. He'd been wearing moccasins for weeks. Helped his gout, it's true, but that had been an unintended benefit. Elon had paid even more for Santa's secret to immortality: the patent and, more importantly, the right to be its sole beneficiary. The settlement would go through next week. An undisclosed amount for Life Eternal.

And Santa had blown the lot on the DeLorean. Eighteen billion, plus the rest. Every cent. And then some.

A dollar for each of the nine billion people on the planet. A dollar for all of those who'd come before. A dollar for every toy he'd ever delivered? Could that be right? Santa's frazzled conscious could not compute such

numbers. Had it been worth it? Had it? His entire life, built on a lie. Could that be right? His entire existence, wasted. For what? And for whom?

Well, the road to hell is paved with good intentions, reflected Santa. And hadn't they had the best intentions? He and Mary. Hadn't they meant well? At least at the start.

'All your good works are like dirty menstrual rags.' Eh? A bible passage, memorised in childhood, ran through Santa's mind like an unwanted earworm, as these things are wont to do when one is in a ruminative mood. He'd been chewing this particular cud for weeks now. ALL your good works. ALL, not some.

Could that be right? Every word. Every deed. Every little kindness. All of them, wasted. All. Each magical 'now' potentially pregnant with possibilities and hope. The potential always there to infect the other person with good. Potential, so much potential, to make the planet a nicer place. But wasted. Aborted or miscarried. Discarded, like dirty refuse. Like smelly fly-blown period rags. Repeated reminders of repeated failure.

Repeated. Stinky. And cruel. So bloody cruel. Why did God expect so much?

Imagine a world where kindness beget kindness. Honesty beget honesty. Generosity beget generosity. Imagine it. Courage. Humility. Begetting. Begetting. Forever begetting. Like a positivity virus. Pregnant. Growing. Edifying. Reaching upwards. All rising. All happy. All free. Growing. Growing. Goodness flowing. Onwards and upwards. Like a beautiful Garden of Eden.

Just imagine.

But Santa had lost the ability to imagine. Good never did overcome evil, in his experience. Good was always weighed down, hemmed in, or obstructed, by some damned constraint: a moral compass, a social more, a legal requirement. Fences. Ceilings. Shackles. Good was always... always... constrained.

But evil was not.

“All your good works are like dirty menstrual rags.” What a hideous truth. Not saved by good works. But saved, none-the-less. FOR them, not by them. What an exhausting expectation. To live for others, even when it is known beforehand that the others are unworthy. Ungrateful. Potentially unsavable. But you must help them anyway?

‘Overcome evil with good.’

But how? How to do it? Santa didn't think he had the energy to try anymore. Evil was just too powerful. It had no constraints. No brakes. No hurdles. Lies could travel further and faster than any contagion, riding roughshod over the truth. Greed and jealousy could do a lifetime of damage within a few brief moments. Kindness was always seen as weakness. Always. Tolerance and patience likewise. Evil was just so... so...

Destructive. And pervasive. And...

... winning. Wasn't evil winning? Hadn't it always been so? Hadn't it been like this since the dawn of time?

How to overcome evil with good? That was the question. And Santa could no longer answer it.

“Problem?” asked Mary as she tip-toed past with a laundry basket and failing torch.

“No,” lied Santa.

“Internet down?” Mary gave her husband a supportive hug, cringing in silence at his rank malodour. “Here, let me...” She leaned across his giant belly, struggling to reach his open laptop. “Ooh, lucky. Fully charged.” Tip tip tap. Tippity tap. Her nimble fingers danced expertly across the keyboard. Within a reindeer's heartbeat she had a pdf open: large font, simple graphics, an itemised checklist detailing the installation of a flux capacitor in a magical flying sleigh.

“Where...”

“I downloaded it last week. After you said there were solar flares fore-

cast... right before you called me a silly old woman and ordered me to make you a milky sweet tea because I didn't understand technology and should keep my nose out of your affairs."

"But..."

"The word you're looking for is 'thankyou'. Now give me your hat. It stinks. You can't go back to the past, and save the world, smelling like a goat."

"I'm not going to save the world. I'm going to save Me. Well, 'Us' actually. We-re going to Mulletfest '88. I'll win 'Best Beard'. You'll drink Fruity Lexia. We'll dance. Okay?"

Mary chuckled. "Silly old duffer." "Where's the Be-dazzler?"

Mary smiled as a wave of nostalgia washed over her spirit. "Try the linen cupboard..."

"... .. where it's always been?" Santa completed the sentence from their favourite Eighties advert. A shared joke they'd always found funny.

"Do you think we should..."

"Stop by Germany and kill Hitler first?" Santa queried.

"I was going to say, 'throw a party for the elves by way of saying thankyou and goodbye. For old time's sake.'" She leaned in and gave him another bear hug. "Of course Love, we'll stop by Germany. And do that thing. That thing you said. Of course. That's a given. Of course we will. ... We should probably take Benny. He has a malicious streak. Keep ourselves free of that sad business."

Then she grinned mischievously. "But let's go to Mulletfest first. You deserve it. Eh... We deserve it. All that giving and giving and no one ever giving back. How can anyone remain a cheerful giver when they're so bloody tired all the time? We desperately need a break, Nick... .. If only someone had left a thankyou note. Somewhere. Sometime. One thankyou note. Just one. It would have made all the difference to our morale... and the elves. I'm sure of it. It would have restored my faith in humanity at the very least. At the very very least."

"They left milk and cookies. And beer sometimes. Better than a kick in the teeth, I guess."

“But was it enough Nick? All those years. Centuries, really. The sacrifice and toil. Were milk and cookies enough?”

“Now now, Sourpuss. Don’t go getting glum on me. It’s not your style. Grab your glad rags. We’re going to Mulletfest. We’re gunna dance. Dance, I tells ya. In double denim. And pixie boots. And big hair. And...”
Mary laughed. “And blue mascara?”

“Midori mixers. Southern comfort. Lime daiquiris.” “Wicked.”

“Grouse.” “Totally rad.”

“Excellent. Party on.”

“Enough,” laughed Mary. “Enough. Back to the real world,” she sighed, as she hoisted the forgotten laundry basket onto her hip and made a grab for Santa’s hat.

“To hell with the real world,” bellowed Santa with gusto. “Come away with me Mary.”

Santa grabbed his wife and twirled her around the cramped office. Mary began giggling as her husband started singing, “I knew the bride when she used to rock and roll.”

“Whrl neu?”

“What?” Mary couldn’t make out her husband’s words as he nuzzled into her neck, sounding for a second like a suckling reindeer.

“Will you?” he repeated.

“Yes Nicholas,” Mary assented softly. “Let’s do the time warp again.”

As the couple fell into a passionate embrace Mary’s skirt clipped a journal balanced on the edge of the desk. The felt-covered book teetered briefly, then fell to the floor with a soft thud, its pages falling open to reveal its most recent entries. On the left page was a childlike drawing: two stick figures walking, hand in hand, into the distant hills - that looked suspiciously like two raised breasts - over which rose a large and smiling sun. A flock of birds flew overhead. Doves? Eagles? Or were they supposed to be flying reindeer? Flying pigs? UAPs? Santa’s drawing skills left a lot to be desired. The effect was comical but childishly optimistic. Mary glanced down and smiled.

On the right-hand page was a poem Santa had written that same morning. In cursive script. Neat. Freely flowing, with no amendments. No editing. It had flowed from his heart, without any obstruction, like a stream of living water. A river of radiant truth. It pooled now in a page on the silent floor beside a rushed first draft of Santa's final Will and Testament. He wasn't entirely confident the DeLorean's flux capacitor would work, or if it did... Would this timeline be deleted, or carry on unchanged? That's the trouble with second-hand cars. The user manual is rarely included.

He had no cash to leave the elves. He regretted it, but that's the way things were. But at the very least he could leave them everything else: his Santa suits, his poetry and stories, philosophical musings of a fringed existence. And the many photos and videos he'd taken over the years: end of season factory celebrations, elves, chandeliers, lots of tinsel. And mesmerising auroras. So @&#%ing mesmerising. Triple circle rainbows, viewed from the stratosphere. A gazillion UAP photos, the nature of which were still a mystery. The photo albums were bursting with memories.

All of his worldly goods were in this factory. Eh... transport hub. They didn't amount to much, Santa admitted, but they were all that he possessed, and he wanted the elves to have them. It mightn't do much to improve their circumstances, but at least it might improve their mood. Knowing that he'd cared. At least a little. He had appreciated them. He had. Even if the Union Reps had convinced them that he hadn't. That was all just business. It wasn't personal. He hoped in the end the elves would understand.

And who knew, a real-life Santa suit signed by him and Mary might fetch a decent sum on eBay. There were thirty still in good nick, and a hundred more in the rag bag in the stable. Santa lived in hope.

Until one day he didn't.

The elves found the open journal on the floor where it had fallen. Santa, his wife and sleigh, and a fractious elf called Benny, were nowhere to be found. There was a brief search, but then the construction noises resumed. The world kept turning. Life went on.

In this timeline at least.

The poem, the will and the stinky Santa-hat lay unnoticed on the floor.

Until one day they didn't. A bored trillionaire, meandering around the site, wandered into the office, stumbled upon the fallen journal, bent and read the poem before ambling off to brush his teeth, order loo roll, and conquer the universe. He had years to contemplate its meaning. By the third millennium the earworm was beginning to grate. He'd only read the poem once but due to his eidetic memory it continued to plague him. Round and round on an endless loop. Immortality is like that. Great at first. Until it starts to grate.

SHALOM

Go gentle, so gentle, into that good night.
Great age should crave and yearn for close of day.
Go gentle, oh gentle, into everlasting light.

Wise men, at their end, know rest is right,
Because they raged and wrestled in their youth,
Humbled by the truth of forced respite.

Good women too, must stumble on their way,
Bucks bent and clothes unkempt by many cares
Until they dare to do the one thing needful... rest and pray.

Wild men rale too in fear and fright
And learn, too late, the struggle is a waste.
They bow their heads and yoke themselves to light.

Blind men as well, near death, regain their sight
And act as guides for others lost, alone.
For Death is not a dying of the light.
United and at peace they're welcomed home.

And you, my troubled soul, on that sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears and pray.

Death is but a doorway bathed in light.
Go gentle. Do not rage at that good night.

xxxxx

Somewhere in the darkness an elvish voice asked quietly, “Why didn’t they just take the DeLorean as is?”

“Yeah, a flying sleigh would have fetched a bucket load more than a bunch of useless photos.”

“Shut up Donny. Mary had never flown before. That’s why he took it. It was always needed for work and the insurance wouldn’t cover non-employees. He wanted to show her the triple rainbows. And the North Pole from above. He wanted to see her eyes sparkle in the moonlight, the way they did when they first met.”

“You always did take Santa’s side.”

“Shut up Karen.”