

Anti-Claus
by
Graham Masterton

It was the bitterest October for eleven years. An ice-storm swept down from Canada across northern Minnesota and didn't let up for nine days and nine nights, which meant that Jerry and me had no choice but to book a couple of rooms at the Sturgeon Motel in Roseau, population 12, 574, and wait until the weather cleared.

We spent most of the time in the North Star Bar, talking to the locals and listening to country songs about miserable trappers and women who wouldn't stay faithful. Outside the world was being blasted with ice, so that power lines snapped and trucks got stranded because their fuel had turned into wax and people went temporarily blind because their eyeballs froze over.

Jerry was as placid as a fireside dog and didn't seem to care if he spent the rest of his life in the North Star Bar, but I started to get cabin fever after only two days. I just wanted to get on with the job and get back to my family in St Paul. I called Jenny twice a day, and talked to the kids, too, Tracey and Mikey, but their voices sounded so tiny and far away that it only made the isolation seem sharper.

Most of the time we talked to the barmaid, Alma Lindenmuth. She had piled-up bleached-blonde hair with the roots showing and a thick, cigarette-smoke voice. She wore a studded denim shirt which showed a lot of cleavage and she smelled of Tommy Girl and something else, sex I guess, like burying your face in the sheets the morning after.

“You guys shouldn't of come up here in the fall, you should of come in August when it's real warm and beautiful and you can fish and everything.”

“Well, we didn't come to enjoy ourselves. We're doing a survey for the Minnesota Forestry Department.”

“Can't you enjoy yourselves just a little bit?”

“Oh, *I* can,” said Jerry, with one eye closed against his dangling cigarette. “But Jack here, he's married, with two young kids. Enjoyment *verboten*.”

Alma leaned forward on the bar, provocatively squashing her mole-spattered breasts together. “Do you know how to merengue?” she asked Jerry.

“Sure, I can cook anything.”

We also talked to an old guy who sat at the far end of the bar knocking back Jack Daniel’s one shot glass after the other, one shot every ten minutes, give or take. He wore a wild high-combed gray hairpiece which looked older than he was, and a skinny, emaciated face with white prickles of stubble where he couldn’t shave into the creases. He was dressed entirely in black, and his eyes were black, too, like excavations to the center of the earth.

“So you’ve come up here to do what?” he wanted to know, without even looking at us.

“A survey, that’s all. The Forestry Department wants to cut down a few thousand acres of jack pine and pitch pine and replace them with white pine and Austrian pine.”

“Why do they want to do that for?”

“Because white pine and Austrian pine are much more commercially profitable.”

“Ah, money. Might have guessed it. And so where are you doing this survey of yours, precisely?”

“Up in the Lost River Forest, mainly, between here and the border.”

“Up near Saint Nicholas?”

“That’s right. Saint Nicholas and Pineroad.”

The old man gave a dry sniff and pushed his shot glass forward for a refill. “Know why they called it Saint Nicholas?”

“I don’t have any idea.”

“They called it Saint Nicholas because that’s where Santa Claus originally originated from.”

“Oh, really? I thought Santa Claus came from Lapland or someplace like that.”

“North Pole, isn’t it?” put in Jerry, and gave his distinctive little whoop.

The old man turned to me and there was something in his expression that was deeply unsettling. I had only seen that look once before in my life, when a farmer drove up to me in his Jeep when I was carrying out a survey in Lac Qui Parle, and came toward me with a pump-action shotgun like he really intended to use it. He said, hoarsely, “There’s Santa Claus the story and then there’s the real Santa Claus. The real Santa Claus lived on his own in a cabin on the Sad Dog River.”

"Oh, sure," said Jerry. "So how come he turns up every year at Dayton's department store?"

The old man knocked back his refill and pushed over his shot glass for another. "You want to learn something or don't you?"

"Go on, then," I encouraged him, and gave Jerry a quick shake of my head to indicate that he should keep his smart remarks to himself.

The old man said, "This was just before the turn of the century when there was only five or six hundred people living in Roseau. Life was pretty much touch-and-go in those days, and in 1898 the spring wheat harvest failed and some of the farm families were pretty close to starvation. But this guy turned up one day, just like out of nowhere, and said that he could change their fortunes if they agreed to give him ten percent off the top.

"Of course they didn't believe him but he went out into the fields and he performed this kind of ritual on every farm, with bones and smoke and circles drawn in the dirt. He did this every week for the whole season, until the farmers came to accept him like they would the veterinary surgeon or the milk-collection man.

"He set up home in a shack, deep in the tangly woods by the Sad Dog oxbow, and he painted that shack as black as night, and nobody knew what tricks he got up to, when he was alone, but some people say they heard screaming and shouting and roaring coming from out of that shack like all the demons in hell. The local preacher said that he was an emissary of Satan, and that no good would come of all of his rituals, and behind his back that was what the people of Roseau started to call him, Satan, even though they carried on allowing him visit their farms with his bones and his smoke because they was superstitious as well as religious and if he really could make their wheat grow, then they wasn't going to act prejudicial toward him.

"Well, the upshot was that the winter harvest was the very best ever, and they brought in more than forty thousand bushels of hard red wheat. They rang the church bell and they gave their thanks to the Lord. But that was when Satan came around asking for his ten per cent off the top.

"Of course none of the farmers would give him nothing. They said that bones and smoke and patterns in the dirt was jiggery-pokery, that was all, and that God had provided, God and good fortune, and a long warm summer. So Satan said okay, if you

won't give me my due, then I'll take it. I can't walk off with four thousand bushels of wheat, so I'll help myself to whatever takes my fancy."

Alma Lindenmuth came up and filled the old man's glass again. "This one's on me," I told her.

"John Shooks, you're not spinning that old Santa story, is he? He tells it to everybody who's too polite to shut him up."

"Hey, it's a very entertaining story," said Jerry.

"I could entertain you better than that."

"I'll bet you could. But we're not pressed for time, are we?"

"That's what the people of Roseau thought," the old man remarked. "But they had no time left at all."

"So what did he do, this Satan?" I asked him.

"On the night of December 10, 1898, he went from one farm to the next, five farms in all, and he was riding on a black sledge drawn by eight black dogs and he was carrying a sack. Several people saw him but nobody guessed what he was up to. All but one of the farms had locked their doors and windows, which was pretty much unheard of in those days, but mostly everybody in Roseau had taken Satan's threat to heart and they wanted to make sure that he didn't lay hands on any of their hard-earned property.

"But it wasn't property he was looking for, and he didn't take no notice of their locks. He climbed onto their rooftops and he broke a hole through the shingles and he climbed down into their children's bedrooms. Remember they had big families in those days, and in one house alone there was seven kids. He cut their heads off with a sickle, all of them, regardless of age, and he stowed the heads in his sack and off he went to his next destination.

"Nobody knows how he managed to break into those houses without anybody hearing him, or how he killed so many kids without waking up the others. But he murdered twenty-seven in all, and took all of their heads. Worst of all, he was never caught. Of course they sent out a sheriff's posse to hunt him down, and for a few miles they could follow his tracks in the snow. But right on the edge of the woods the tracks petered out, and the dogs lost his scent, and the sheriff had to admit that Satan had gotten clean away. The posse went to his shack and they ransacked it and then they burned it down to the

ground, but that was all they could do. Satan was never seen again and neither was the children's heads."

"You won't read about that night in any of the local history books, and you can understand why. But when it's Christmas time, parents in Roseau still tell their children that they'd better be good, and that they'd better pay up what they owe, whether it's money or favors, because Satan will come through the ceiling with his sickle looking for his ten percent off the top."

"Well, that's some yarn," I admitted.

"You think it's a yarn and you don't believe it, but Santa is only Satan spelled wrong, and two Decembers back we had some professor up here from Washington, DC, because the FBI was investigating nine children who had their heads whopped off in Iowa someplace and she said that the mode-ass operandy was exactly the same as the Sad Dog Satan."

"That *is* interesting."

"Sure it's interesting, but I'll tell you what the clincher is. This professor said the same mode-ass operandy has been used for hundreds of years even further back than Saint Nicholas himself, which is why I say that the Sad Dog Satan is the real Santa and not your bearded fat guy with the reindeers and the bright red suit, although you can see why the story got changed so that kids wouldn't be scared shitless. The real Santa comes at night and he climbs through your roof and takes your kids' heads off and carries them away in his sack, and that's not mythology, that's the truth."

Jerry lifted his empty glass to show Alma Lindenmuth that he was ready for another. Alma Lindenmuth said, "Same old story, over and over."

"It's a great story. And that never occurred to me before, you know, Santa being a palindrome of Satan."

"It's an anagram," I corrected him, "not a palindrome. A palindrome is the same backward as it is forward."

Jerry winked at Alma Lindenmuth and said, "You're forward, Alma. How about doing it backward?"

On the tenth night the storm cleared and by morning the sun was shining on the ice and there was even a drip on the nose of Roseau's founder, Martin Braaten, standing in the town square with one of those pioneering looks on his face.

Jerry and I said goodbye to Alma Lindenmuth and John Shooks and we drove northward on 310 into the Lost River Forest. It was a brilliant sparkling day and we had two flasks of hot coffee and fresh-baked donuts and everything seemed pretty good with the world. Jerry seemed particularly pleased with himself and I guessed that Alma Lindenmuth had paid him a farewell visit last night at the Sturgeon Hotel.

Saint Nicholas wasn't much of a place, only five houses and a gas station, but it did have an airfield. We had rented a helicopter from Lost River Air Services so that we could take a look at the forests from the air, and make some outline recommendations to the Forestry Department about the prime sites for felling and replanting. Mostly we were looking for sheltered southern slopes where the young saplings would be protected from the north-west winds, giving us quicker growth and a quicker return on the state's investment.

The blue-and-white helicopter was waiting for us with its rotors idly turning. Jerry parked the Cherokee and we walked across the airfield with our eyes watering and our noses running and the dry snow whipping around our ankles.

The pilot was a morose old veteran with a wrinkly leather jacket and a wrinkly leather face. "You can call me Bub," he announced.

"That's great," said Jerry. "I'm Bob and this is my pal Bib."

The pilot eyed him narrowly. "You pulling my chain, son?"

"No sir Bub."

We climbed into the helicopter and buckled up and Bub took us up almost immediately, while Jerry unfolded the maps. "We want to fly west-north-west to the Roseau River and then south-south-west to Pierce's Peak."

We triangulated the Lost River Forest for over three-and-a-half hours, taking photographs and videos and shading in our maps with thick green crayons. At last I said, "That's it, Bub. I think we're just about done for today. Are you okay for tomorrow, though, just in case we need to double-check anything?"

"So long as the weather holds off."

We were heading back toward Saint Nicholas when Jerry suddenly touched me on the shoulder and pointed downward off our starboard side. “See that? The Sad Dog River oxbow. That’s where Satan had his shack.”

I turned to Bub and shouted, “Can you take us down lower?”

“You’re paying.”

The land was flat and scrubby here, and the Sad Dog River squiggled its way across the plain before dividing itself into an oxbow. In the middle of the oxbow, I could make out the ruins of an old shack, with only its stone chimney left standing. The river ran on either side of it, shining in the two o’clock sunlight like two streams of molten metal.

“Let’s take a look!” I yelled.

“You want to land?”

“Sure, just for a couple of minutes.”

“Bib’s thinking of buying this place for a summer home,” put in Jerry.

Bub angled the helicopter around the trees and landed only fifty feet away from the shack. Jerry and I climbed out and approached the shack with our coat-collars turned up. It had been burned right down to the floorboards, so it was impossible to tell if it had ever been painted black, but because most of the timbers had been reduced to charcoal they hadn’t rotted. The roof had fallen in, and there was nothing left of the door but a corroded metal catch, but there was still a wheelback chair beside the fireplace, burned but intact, as if it were still waiting for its owner to return home.

“What are you actually looking for?” asked Jerry, clapping himself with his arms to keep himself warm.

“I don’t know...I just wanted to see the place, that’s all. I mean, if the stable where Jesus was born was still standing, you’d want to take a look at that, too, wouldn’t you?”

“This place gives me the creeps.”

I looked around and I had to admit that the Sad Dog River oxbow was a pretty desolate location. Bub had shut off the helicopter’s engine and the quietness was overwhelming. The Sad Dog River itself was so shallow that it barely gurgled, and there were no birds singing in the trees. All I could hear was the fluffing of the wind in my ears. A crow fluttered down and perched on the back of the wheelback chair, staring at us with its head on one side, but it didn’t croak, and after a while it flapped off again.

I had the unsettling feeling that somebody had walked up behind me, and was standing very close to me, staring at me.

“Come on,” said Jerry. “I’m in serious need of a drink.”

We were walking back to the helicopter when Jerry stumbled. “You got it wrong again,” I told him. “It’s drink first, *then* fall over..”

“Goddamned tripped on something.”

He went back and kicked at the tufty grass. Then suddenly he hunkered down, and took out his clasp-knife, and started to dig.

“What have you got there?”

“Some kind of a handle.”

He kept on digging out chunks of turf and at last he exposed a rectangular metal box with a rusted metal handle. He tugged it, and tugged it again, and at last he managed to wrench it free.

“The lost treasure of the Sad Dog River Satan,” he announced.

“Okay...let’s see what it is.”

The box was locked, and the lock was thickly rusted, but Bub found a long screwdriver and after considerable cursing and grunting we managed to pry the lid open. Inside was a soft gray cloth, in which a collection of bones were carefully wrapped; and seven glass jars containing some kind of powder; and five blackened sleigh-bells. Jerry lifted up one of the glass jars and peered at the hand-written label. “Human Dust.”

Bub said, “What is it, magic-making stuff?”

“It looks like it. Did you ever hear of the Satan of Sad Dog River?”

Bub shook his head. “Wasn’t brought up in these parts. Came from Sweet Home, Oregon, me.”

“He was supposed to have lived in that shack. Killed twenty-seven children by cutting their heads off.”

“No shit.”

Jerry closed the box and said, “Let’s go find that drink. I reckon this could be worth something. You know, maybe the Roseau town museum might be interested in buying it.”

“You think so? They don’t even want to *talk* about what happened that night, let alone commemorate it.”

We took the rusty old box back to Roseau and showed it to John Shooks.

“There,” he said, picking over its contents with undisguised triumph. “Told you it wasn’t mythology.”

Alma Lindenmuth puckered up her nose in disgust. “It all looks horrible. What are you going to do with it?”

“Sell it, most likely,” said Jerry.

“Not in Roseau you won’t,” said John Shooks. “That’d be like trying to sell bits of airplane wreck to the people in New York.”

“I think maybe we should find out exactly what all of this is,” I suggested. “I mean, if the Sad Dog River Satan used it to make the wheat crop grow, how did it work?”

Jerry said, “He was lucky with the weather, that’s all. You don’t seriously think that Human Dust and old bones can give you a bumper cereal crop?”

“I’d just be interested to know what kind of a ritual he was carrying out. And don’t be so dismissive. I saw a TV documentary about a Modoc wonder-worker once, and *he* used bones and powders and circles in the dirt. He brought on a rainstorm in under an hour, and it went on raining for three weeks solid.”

“Oh, please. What was that, the Discovery Channel?”

“Okay, but I still think we ought to look into it. Suppose it can help us to make pines grow quicker?”

“Good soil, good light, regular rainfall, that’s what makes pines grow quicker.” Jerry lifted out the jars of powder one by one “Not Crushed Mirror, Rowan Ash, Medlar Flower, Houndstongue, Sulfur Salt and Dry Frog Blood.”

“Well, sure, you’re probably right,” I told him. But I still couldn’t shake off the feeling that had crept over me by that burned-out shack on the Sad Dog River, like somebody coming up close behind me and breathing on my neck.

We were called back to St Paul the following afternoon. Since there seemed to be no prospect of making any ready cash out of Satan’s box, Jerry let me have it. I wrapped it

up in a copy of the *Roseau Times-Region* and packed it in my suitcase along with my cable-knit sweaters.

Even in the city it was minus 5 and when I drove back out to Maplewood my neighbors were clearing a fresh fall of snow from their driveways. We lived in a small development close to Maplewood golf course, just six houses in a private loop. I parked outside and Jenny opened the door wearing jeans and a red reindeer sweater, her blonde hair shining in the winter sun. Tracey and Mikey came running out after her, and it was just like one of those family reunions you used to see on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*.

My neighbor Ben Kellerman raised his woolly hat to me to reveal his bald dome and called out, “Go back to your woods, Jack!” It was joke between us, based on some Robbie Robertson song about a hick trying to make it big in the city.

There was chicken pot-pie that night, and candied yams, and the house was warm and cozy. I took Tracey and Mikey upstairs at seven o’clock and sat on the end of Mikey’s bed and read them a story about Santa Claus. Not the Santa Claus that John Shooks had told me about, but the jolly fat guy with the big white beard.

“When it’s Christmas, I’m going to stay awake all night so that I can see Santa coming down the chimney,” said Mikey. He was seven-and-a-half, with sticky-out ears, He was a whirlwind of energy during the day, but he could never keep his eyes open later than a quarter of nine.

“I’m going to bake him a Christmas cake,” said Tracey, sedately. She was such a pretty thing, skinny and small like her mother, with big gray eyes and wrists so thin that you could close your hand around them.

When the kids were tucked up in bed, Jenny and I sat in front of the fire with a bottle of red wine and talked. I told her all about Satan from Sad Dog River, and she shuddered. “That’s a *terrible* story.”

“Yes, but there must be some truth in it. After all, we found Satan’s box of tricks, so even if he wasn’t responsible for making the crops grow, he existed, at least.”

“I don’t know why you brought the box back with you. It’s *ghoulish*.”

“It’s only a musty old collection of different powders, and bones.”

“What kind of bones?”

“How should I know? Dog’s, probably.”

“Well, I don’t want it in the house.”

“All right, I’ll put it in the garage.”

“I don’t know why you don’t just throw it in the trash.”

“I want to find out more about it. I want to know what this Satan was actually trying to do.”

“Well, I don’t. I think it’s horrible.”

I put the box on my workbench at the back of the garage. I stood looking at it for a while before I switched off the light. It’s difficult to explain, but it definitely had a *tension* about it, like the wheelback chair, as if it were waiting for its owner to come back and open it.

I locked the garage door and went up to bed. Jenny was waiting for me and she looked so fresh and she smelled so good. There’s nothing to compare to a homecoming when you’ve been away for two weeks looking at trees and more trees.

When she fell asleep I lay awake next to her. A hazy moon was shining, and just after one o’clock in the morning it started to snow. I turned over and tried to sleep, but for some reason I couldn’t, as tired as I was, as contented as I was.

Just after two o’clock I heard a rattling noise, somewhere downstairs. I sat up and listened, with my ears straining. Another rattle, and then another, and then silence. It sounded like somebody shaking dice.

I must have fallen asleep around three, but I dreamed that I could hear the rattling again, and so I climbed out of bed and made my way downstairs. The rattling was coming from the garage, no question about it. I pressed my ear against the door, listening and listening. I was just about to turn the key when the door was flung wide open, and a white-faced man was standing in the doorway, screaming at me.

I sat up in bed, sweating. The moon had passed the window and it had stopped snowing. I drank half a glass of water, and then I dragged the covers over me and tried to get back to sleep again. There was no more rattling, no more screaming, but I felt as if the house had been visited that night, although I couldn’t understand by whom, or by *what*.

The next morning Jenny took the kids shopping at Marshall Field's, which gave me a chance to go into my study in my blue-striped robe and my rundown slippers and do some research on the internet. I sipped hot black coffee while my p.c. looked for Santa and Satan and fertility rituals and crop circles.

I was surprised to find out how recently our modern idea of "Santa Claus" was developed. Up until Clement Clark Moore published his poem *The Night Before Christmas*, Santa was almost always portrayed as a haggard old Father Time figure, with an hourglass and a scythe – deeply threatening, rather than merry – the pallbearer of the dying year. But Moore described him "chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf", and in the 1870s the illustrator Thomas Nast drew him as a white-bearded figure in a red suit with white fur trim. In the 1930s and 1940s, Haddon H. Sundblom, an advertising illustrator for Coca-Cola, painted dozens of pictures of the grandfatherly Santa as we think of him today, with his red cap and his heavy belt and boots and his round, rosy cheeks. The gaunt, doomy Father Christmas -- the *real* Father Christmas -- was forgotten.

Much more cheerful, I guess, to tell your kids that Christmas is the time for lots of toys and candies and singing, rather than remind them that they're one year nearer their graves.

After I had checked out Santa, I went searching for any rituals involving Human Dust and Crushed Mirrors. It took me over an hour, but at last I turned up details of a ceremony that dated way back to the days of Nectanebo I, the last native ruler of Ancient Egypt, in 380 BC. Apparently, good king Nectanebo had an entourage of black magicians, who were employed to do deals with the gods. They were said to have derived their powers of sorcery from a god called Set, a dark and sinister being who is historically associated with Satan. It was Set who murdered the fertility god, Osiris, in order to steal his powers, and Set who blinded Horus, the Egyptian war god, which led to the invasion of Egypt by Assyria and Persia and other foreign invaders.

In the *Les Véritables Clavicules de Satan*, a 14th-century book of demonology which was banned by Pope Innocent VI, I found an account which said, "Satan walks abroad, offering his assistance to those in the direst need. When cattle give no milk, he will work his magic to restore their flow. When crops die, he will ensure that they flourish. He will

appear to be a savior and a friend to all, but woe betide any who do not pay him what he demands, for he will surely take more than they can bear to give him."

The ritual for reviving crops was recounted in detail. It involved lighting five fires, and sprinkling seven spoonfuls of powder into each of them, and inscribing a five-pointed star in the soil. The sorcerer would then tap five bones together and repeat the words of the Satanic invocation five times. "*I summon thee, O Prince of Darkness, O Spirit of the Pit –*" and so on.

I made a few notes and then I sat back and had a long think. This sounded like total mumbo-jumbo, but if it didn't work at all, why had it survived for more than twenty-three centuries? And what had *really* happened in Roseau, when the wheat harvest had failed?

While Jenny and the kids were out, I decided to try an experiment. I pulled on my boots and my thick plaid coat and I took Satan's box out into the snow-covered yard. I lit five fires out of kindling, and drew a five-pointed star with a sharp stick, and then I walked around each of the fires in turn, spooning in powder from Satan's screwtop jars. To finish up, I unwrapped the bones, and held them between my fingers, and rattled them together while I read out the Satanic invocation.

"I adjure thee to grant my will and my pleasure. I adjure thee to make my crop grow tall and strong. Venite O Satan, amen."

It was then that Ben Kellerman looked over the fence with his duck-hunting cap on. "Christ, Jack, what the hell are you doing out here? Cooking a chicken with the feathers still on it?"

"Sorry, Ben. Just trying something out."

"Well next time you want to try something out, make sure the wind's blowing in the opposite direction."

I had to admit that Ben was right. As the powders crackled in the fires, they gave off swirls of thick, pungent smoke, and the smoke smelled of incinerated flesh, and hair, and scorched wool. It was what witches must have smelled like, when they were burned at the stake.

After I had finished the invocation, I packed the bones and the powders back into the box and went back inside. I watched the fires for a while, in the gathering gloom of a

winter's afternoon, but eventually the wind began to rise, and scatter the yard with sparks and ashes.

I had to go to Portland, Oregon, that weekend, to attend a convention of wood pulpers. As you can imagine, wood pulpers are not the most scintillating people you'll ever meet. They're very rich, most of them, I'll grant you that. They're deeply concerned about the environment, too – mainly because of the eye-watering fines they're likely to incur if they don't replant the acres of forest that they've turned into cardboard boxes. But when I wasn't discussing the comparative profitability of different species of fir, or the joys of corrugated packaging, I retreated to my hotel room with the latest Michael Crichton novel and a large glass of Canadian Club.

On the third evening, when I returned to my room, the red light on the phone was blinking. It was Jenny, and she had left me a voice message. "Something so weird has happened...it's in the back yard. There's *grass* growing, right up through the snow."

And so there was. By the time I got home, mid-morning on Monday, there were hundreds of thin green spears of grass rising at least three inches clear of the snow, all over the yard, and a few weeds, too. I knelt down and brushed the palm of my hand across them.

"Grass doesn't usually grow in November, does it?" asked Jenny. "Not like this."

"No, not usually."

"There isn't any grass growing in anybody else's yard, only ours."

I stood up. "I know. I know there isn't."

So it worked. The ritual performed by the Sad Dog River Satan actually worked. He *had* revived their wheat crop. He *had* been responsible for giving them a bumper harvest, and saving them all from starvation. Of course there was no rational scientific explanation for it. None of the powders had been sprinkled on the ground in sufficient quantity to act as a growth accelerant, even if any of them had been components of any recognized fertilizer, which they weren't. You can't make your cabbages grow bigger by showering them with smashed mirrors and frogs' blood.

I went back into the house, but I couldn't resist looking out of the window from time to time, and each time I looked it seemed as if the grass was even taller, and even thicker.

If this ritual worked, then I was going to be rich. No two ways about it. I could sell my services to every farm and forestry department in the country. Think of it. They would never risk losing a crop to drought or storms or diseases. They wouldn't need nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium any more, only me. I would save them billions of dollars, and I could charge them millions.

"You're very quiet," said Jenny, over our spaghetti supper.

I smiled at her, and nodded. "I was thinking about Christmas, that's all. I think it might have come early this year."

During November the grass in our yard continued to grow thick and lush, and I had to cut it with a sickle every weekend. I took two weeks off work, and I sat down with my accountant George Nevis and mapped out a business plan, although I didn't tell George exactly what my product was. "Just take a look out of the window, George. It's the middle of winter, in St Paul, and I can make the grass grow. This is my very first test, but I believe I can do the same thing for every cash crop in the world."

George blinked at me through his thick-lensed eyeglasses. "Jack, you're talking very serious profit here. But not just profit. This has huge political implications, too. Like, *huge*. Even the President can't make the grass grow in the middle of winter."

I patted him on the back. "It's a new era, George, and it belongs to me."

Two days before Christmas Jenny came into my study and said, "There's somebody to see you. He wouldn't give his name."

I was having a headache working out a franchise scheme for Miracle Crop Services. Obviously it was going to be impossible for me to visit every potential customer in person, so I would have to employ people to tour the country and perform the ritual for me. The principal problem was that – once I had told them how it was done, and given them the wherewithal to do it -- they could go out and do it on their own and tell me to stick my franchise where you don't need Ray-Bans.

"Sorry – whoever it is, tell him I'm busy."

But Jenny came back a few moments later and said, "He says he really has to see you. It's about the grass."

“Okay, okay.” I left my desk and went to the front door. A tall, thin man was standing in the porch, one side of his face illuminated scarlet by the sunshine that came through the stained-glass window; the other side yellow. He wore a black wide-brimmed hat and a long black coat and his hair was almost shoulder-length, dry and gray.

He had a large nose, but otherwise his face was strangely unmemorable, as if he had moved his head while his photograph was being taken.

“Hallo, Jack,” he said, but he didn’t extend his hand.

“Yes? I’m very busy, I’m afraid.”

“Well, I’ve come to relieve you of all of that.”

“Excuse me?”

“I believe that you have something that belongs to me. In fact, I only had to look over into your back yard to *know* that you have something that belongs to me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I think you’d better get off my property before I call the cops.”

“My box, Jack. My trusty old box, with all of my powders and my bones and my -- ” and here he held up his finger and thumb and made a little shaking gesture “ – *jingle, jingle, sleigh-bells.*”

“I don’t have anything that belongs to you. I don’t even know who the hell you are.”

The man gave the faintest of smiles. “I think you know exactly who I am, Jack. I’m the kind of man who can wait a very long time to get what he wants. I’m the kind of man who follow you right to the ends of the earth. You have my trusty old box, Jack. I went back for it and it wasn’t there and it sure took some sniffing around to find out what had happened to it.”

“It was abandoned. It was lying in the dirt. Who’s to say it’s yours?”

“It’s mine because it’s mine, Jack, and I want it back.”

“Well, forget it. Okay? You understand English? That box is mine now and you don’t have any way of proving different.”

“So what are you going to do with it, Jack? Apart from making your back yard look like Kentucky?”

“I don’t have to tell you what I’m going to do with it.”

The man smiled even more widely, his eyes glittering in his red-and-yellow harlequin face. "I know. You think you're going to make your fortune, don't you? You think you're going to be rich beyond the dreams of men. But it doesn't work that way, Jack. Never has. The ritual works once and only once. It gives you a helping hand when you're lower than low and you don't know what else to do. And it always carries its price, and one way or another, you have to pay that price, in full."

"Okay, you've had your say. Now I'm calling the cops."

"You still don't get it, do you? The ritual isn't an act of kindness. I'm not in the charity business, Jack, never have been. The ritual is temptation. The ritual is what you turn to when the Lord thy God appears to have abandoned you. Why do you think I come at Christmas-time? Is there anything more satisfying than having somebody deny their faith on the very eve of the Virgin Birth?"

"You're crazy. Get out of here."

"I want my trusty old box, Jack, I'm warning you, and if I don't get my trusty old box, you're going to have to pay me recompense."

I slammed the door in his face. He waited outside for a while: I could see his face through the hammered-glass porthole. Then he turned and went away, closing the screen door very carefully so that it didn't make a sound.

Tracey and Mikey came scuttling down the stairs and Mikey said, "Daddy banged the door!"

"The wind caught it," I told him, tousling his hair.

Jenny came out of the kitchen looking worried. "Who was that man? What did he want?"

"Nothing. Just a bum, looking for a handout."

"You were angry with him. I heard you."

"I told you, it's nothing."

I tried to go back into my study but Jenny caught my arm. "There's something wrong, isn't there? Ever since you came home from Roseau, you've been acting so strange."

"There's nothing wrong. In fact everything's one hundred and ninety percent right. This year we're going to have a Christmas we'll remember for the rest of our lives."

It snowed on Christmas Eve and carol-singers came around from house to house, carrying lanterns. Tracey and Mikey knelt up on the window-seat looking out at the street and their faces were lit up by the Christmas lights. Jenny squeezed my hand and said, “Mikey’s so excited I think he’s going to be sick.”

We had supper together, and then the children put out Tracey’s Christmas cake and a glass of Canadian Club for Santa. The cake was lopsided but I assured Tracey that Santa wouldn’t mind, in fact Lopsided Cake was his favorite. I hugged them both before they went to bed and believe me there is no smell like the smell of your own children at Christmas. You don’t need spices or mulled wine.

As we sat together that evening, Jenny said, “I wish you’d tell me what’s really going on.”

“Nothing at all. I’m planning to go into crop management, that’s all. I’ve had enough years of experience, growing things.”

“But that man. He wasn’t just a bum, was he? He said he wanted to talk to you about the grass.”

“He was being nosey, that’s all.”

She frowned at me. “It isn’t just a freak of nature, is it, that grass?”

“What else could it be?”

“You tell me. There’s some sort of connection, isn’t there, between the grass growing like that and you wanting start up a new business? Why can’t you tell me what it is?”

“You wouldn’t understand it even if I told you. It’s too technical.”

She suddenly sat up straight. “You used the things in that box, didn’t you, like that man in Roseau?” God, women and their intuition. “You did the same ritual, and it worked.”

“Jenny – don’t be ridiculous. You can’t make grass grow by burning fires and sprinkling powder on it.”

“There were ashes on the snow, I saw them. You did it, didn’t you, and it worked?”

I took a deep breath. “All right, yes. I did it and it worked. And if it works for the grass and it works for wheat it’s going to work for corn and broccoli and potatoes and rutabaga. God knows, it may even work for sheep and cows. That’s why this is going to be the best Christmas ever. This is the Christmas when we start getting very, very rich.”

“So what did that man want?”

"I told you. He was sticking his nose in where it wasn't wanted. He saw the grass and wondered how I'd managed to grow it."

"And you slammed the door on him?"

"Jenny -- "

"Jack, I have a very bad feeling about this. I mean it. Using the things in that box -- that's like making a deal with the devil."

"It's folk magic, that's all. It's perfectly harmless."

At that moment the phone rang. Jenny answered it but it was Jerry, wanting to talk to me.

"Listen, Jack, I don't want to spoil your Christmas Eve, but something's happened."

"What is it? You sound terrible. Do you have a cold?"

"I called Alma. You remember Alma from the North Star Bar?"

"Of course I remember Alma. What about her?"

"I called her. I was going to invite her down to St Paul for New Year's."

"So? Is she coming?"

"She's dead, Jack. They found her this morning. She and John Shooks, both. It seems like a guy came into the bar two nights ago asking about a tin box. He talked to Alma and he talked to John Shooks and it seems like they wouldn't tell him nothing, and there was some kind of an argument."

"It was Alma's day off yesterday, but when she didn't show up this morning the manager went to look for her. He broke into her room and there she was in bed with her head cut off. Tortured, too, all of her fingernails and toenails pulled out. The cops went round to John Shooks' place and the same thing had happened to him. Jesus -- they haven't even found their heads yet."

I talked to Jerry a while longer, just to calm him down, but then I had to put the phone down, because I was starting to shake. That was how the man in the black hat had discovered where I lived. And if he could do that to Alma Lindenmuth and John Shooks just to find me, what was he going to do to *me*?

"If I don't get my trusty old box, you're going to have to pay me recompense."

We went to bed late that night, well after midnight. All I told Jenny about Jerry was that two of his friends had been killed in an accident. I didn't want *her* to start worrying, too. We tippy-toed into the children's room and filled the pillow-cases they had left out for Santa – a Bratz doll and a hairbrush set for Tracey and a collection of Harry Potter figures for Mikey, as well as candies and oranges and nuts.

I left their doorway a couple of inches ajar and then I followed Jenny to the bedroom. "You're so *tense*," she said. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, really."

"Jack – what I said about making a deal with the devil – I didn't really mean it."

"Well, maybe it was a pretty stupid thing for me to do."

"If you think it's really going to make us rich -- "

I took hold of her hands and kissed her on the forehead. "I don't know. Sometimes you can stop and take a look at yourself and it hits you -- my God, is this really *me*, behaving like this?"

"You're a good man, Jack."

"I used to think so. Now I'm not so sure."

We went to bed but this was another night when I couldn't sleep. The hours ticked by and the clock in the hallway chimed each hour. At three o'clock, after the chimes had died away, I was sure that I could hear a faint jingling. Just an echo, probably. I had a brief fight with my pillow and tried to get comfortable, but the covers were all twisted and I didn't want to pull them too hard in case I woke Jenny.

As I settled down, I heard the jingling again. It was slightly louder this time, and closer. I lay in the darkness, waiting and listening. Then I heard a hollow knocking sound, right outside our bedroom window, as if something had struck the fascia boards around the guttering. I eased myself out of bed and looked outside.

It was steadily snowing, and the street was glistening white. There, in our driveway, was a long black sleigh, with eight shaggy black dogs harnessed in it, panting patiently. The sleigh was empty, except for a heap of black sacks. I suddenly realized what the knocking sound had been – a long ladder, placed against the house.

"Jenny!" I shouted at her, shaking her shoulder. "Jenny, wake up! Call the police!"

She sat up and stared at me blurrily.

“Call 911! Do it now!”

But right above us, I heard footsteps crossing the roof, and then the creak of shingles being torn out. The children, for God’s sake. He was trying to get to the children.

I hurtled along the landing to the children’s room, but as I reached the door it slammed shut, and I heard the key turn. I pummeled against the paneling with my fists, and I threw my shoulder against it, but it wouldn’t budge.

“Tracey! Mikey! Wake up! Open the door! Open the door and get out of there, quick!”

I heard more creaks as nails were dragged out of the roof. I hammered on the door again and shouted, “Tracey! Mikey! Wake up! You have to get out of there!”

Now I heard Mikey crying, and Tracey calling, “What is it? What is it? The ceiling’s breaking!”

“The door’s locked! Turn the key and get out of there, quick as you can!”

Jenny came hurrying along the landing, her hair wild. “The police are coming right now. Five minutes, they said. What’s happening?”

“Open the door Tracey goddamnit! Open the door!”

“I can’t!” wailed Tracey. “The key won’t turn!”

“What’s happening?” Jenny screamed at me. “What’s happening? Why can’t you open the door?”

“It’s him,” I told her. “It’s the man who came this afternoon. It’s Satan.”

“What? What have you done? Get my children out of there! Get my children out of there!”

I held onto the banister and kicked at the door with my bare feet, but it was too solid to budge. Inside, Tracey and Mikey were shrieking hysterically.

“Daddy! Somebody’s coming through the ceiling! Daddy, open the door! It’s a man and he’s coming through the ceiling!”

Oh shit, I thought. Oh shit oh shit. Jenny was totally panicking now and beating at the door so hard that she was breaking all her nails and spattering the paintwork with blood.

God there was only one thing to do and I hoped it wasn’t too late. I ran along the landing and down the stairs, three at a time. Jenny called after me, “Where are you going? Jack! We have to open the door!”

“Mommy! Mommy! I can see his legs! Open the door, mommy!”

I careered through the kitchen and opened the door that led to the garage. I seized the metal box from my workbench and went running back upstairs with it.

“What good will that do?” Jenny screamed at me. “You could have brought your ax!”

But I went up close to the door and shouted out, “Listen to me! I have it! Your box! If you let my children alone and open the door you can have it back right now!”

I heard a crack-*thump* as the man broke through the last of the plaster and dropped down onto the floor. Tracey moaned and Mikey gave that little yelp that he always gives when he’s really, seriously scared.

“Can you hear me?” I asked him. “I have it right here in my hand. You can have it back, no questions asked, no charges brought, nothing. Just open the door and take the box and we’ll let you leave.”

There was a long, long silence. I could still hear Mikey mewling so the man couldn’t have hurt them yet.

“Please,” I said. “Those are our children.”

Jenny stood close beside me, clenching and unclenching her bloodied fists. Then she suddenly screeched out, “*Open the door you bastard! Open the door!*”

Another silence, and then the key was turned. The door swung open by itself.

Tracey and Mikey were cowering down behind Mikey’s bed. The man was standing in the middle of their bedroom, his black clothes covered in plaster-dust. He had torn a hole in the ceiling three feet across and snow was whirling into the bedroom, and melting as it touched the carpet. He was holding a large curved sickle, with a black handle and an oily blade.

I stepped forward, lifting the box in my left hand. “Here,” I said. “Everything’s in there, except for the powder I used on the grass.”

He smiled at me, and hooked his sickle into his belt, and took the box in both hands.

“I’m sorry I took it,” I told him. “I didn’t realize that it was yours...that you were still alive after all those years.”

Jenny skirted around behind me, took hold of Tracey and Mikey, and hurried them out of the bedroom. The man raised one eyebrow and said, “Beautiful children. You were wise.”

"No...I was just what you said I was. Greedy. Wanting something for nothing. And I almost lost my family because of it."

"Oh, I shouldn't be too hard on yourself, Jack. We all make mistakes."

His mistake was to put the box down on the floor and open it up, just to make sure that everything was there. He should have trusted me. While he was bent over it, I swung myself around like a baseball pitcher and lifted the sickle that I was holding in my right hand. He sensed my movement and began to raise his eyes but it was then that I hit him across the back of the neck and the sickle chopped right through his dry gray hair and right through his vertebrae and halfway through his throat. His head dropped forward onto his chest as if it were attached by a hinge, and blood jumped out of his neck and into the box. He looked at me – he actually looked at me, upside-down, from under his arm, and that look would give me nightmares for countless Christmases to come. Then he fell sideways onto the carpet.

I didn't want to do it, but somehow I knew that I had to. I turned him over and hacked at his neck twice more, until his head was completely severed. After that I didn't have the strength to do anything else, but kneel beside him with gloves made of gradually-drying blood, while the snow fell onto my shoulders, and a police siren warbled closer and closer.

It was Christmas Day, and Santa had been.

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