

Christmas Inc

Up on the rooftop burros grin
Out jumps good old Papa Chin
Down thru the chimney with lots of toys
All for the little ones'
Christmas joys

Ho, ho, ho!
Who wouldn't go!
Ho, ho, ho!
Who wouldn't go-O!
Up on the rooftop
the braying begins
Down thru the chimney with
Papa Chin

First comes the stocking
Of little Nell
Oh, Papa Chin
Fill it well
Give her a dolly
with leaded paint
One that causes
her mom to faint

Ho, ho, ho!
Who wouldn't go!
Ho, ho, ho!
Who wouldn't go-O!
Up on the rooftop
the braying begins
Down thru the chimney with
Papa Chin

Next comes the stocking
Of little Will
Oh, just see what
A glorious fill
Start with a bike with defective welds
Built in the land where Pandas dwell

Ho, ho, ho!
Who wouldn't go!
Ho, ho, ho!
Who wouldn't go-O!
Up on the rooftop
the braying begins
Down thru the chimney with
Papa Chin

Oh that song. He heard it over and over again in his head. It wouldn't let go of him.

Santa stood at the window, looking out on the North Pole. A bitter wind swept up from the south. Snow drifts built up against the unused workshops. Glass from broken windows littered the snow. Somewhere in the scene below, he heard the clatter of a loose shutter.

The streets were deserted now. The once famous candy cane pole lay buried under tons of snow. Lanes and alleyways filled with trash, the avenues impassable. Sleighs lay strewn about, abandoned. Newspapers swirled in the wind.

Below the streets, in what was once the world's pre-eminent subway system, magnetic trams lay unused. Signs dangled from one hook. The hum and bustle of the North Pole was gone, replaced by an overwhelming feeling of emptiness.

The workshops lay bare. The expensive lathes and planning machines had been stripped from their mountings and sold long ago. The paint room was only a memory, the floors covered with a rainbow of colors. Occasionally an emaciated mouse poked his nose out of a hole and sniffed. No leftovers or dropped crumbs today. Or ever again.

The dormitories, the cafeteria, the meeting rooms, all empty, silent. Not a whisper, not a sound.

The cafes, the theatres, once world-class, the arcades and bowling alleys all sat vacant. Used reindeer lots filled with ghosts. Grocery stores and boutiques sported empty shelves.

Up on the rooftop burros grin
Out jumps good old papa Chin
Down thru the chimney with lots of toys
All for the little ones
Christmas joys

That song. It wouldn't go away. It played again and again in his mind.

Santa turned from the window. His once-famous red suit hung limply from his thin shoulders; his white hair a long, matted mess. His beard covered with crumbs. He smelled of alcohol. His belly no longer shook like jelly when he laughed. He didn't laugh anymore. There was nothing to be jolly about.

A weak flame burned in his fireplace, fueled by broken bits of furniture scavenged from other buildings, other rooms. What meager heat it produced could not warm the chill in his soul.

He lowered himself into an overstuffed chair. The room smelled musty, closed up, unused. The oil paintings on the walls, Van Goghs and Rembrandts, were covered in dust and cob webs. When was the last time an elfin duster had touched these walls?

His mind raced. He thought back over the last several years. He grasped for understanding.

How had it all gone so wrong?

Author's Note

Come gather around me children. Bring your hot cocoa and pumpkin pie. Crowd around the fire and let me tell you a story of Christmas yet to come.

In 1843 Charles Dickens wrote of a cold, dark London and the struggles of one man to find the meaning of Christmas. A hundred and seventy years later, the whole country, the whole world is still fighting that struggle.

This little tale, dear friends, is the story of a Christmas future that Dickens couldn't have imagined. Our world has changed, evolved, into a place that Dickensonians would not recognize. Humor me as we take a stroll through the years to a time in the not-to-far distant future.

Welcome to the world of Christmas Inc.

Penn Wallace
La Paz, Mexico
August 2013

Book 1

Chapter 1

The high-tech phone on Jolene's desk buzzed. A message popped up on her computer screen. She wasn't used to the new system. Having both her phone and her computer beckoning her at the same time confused her. But, it did show her caller-ID. The pop-up on her computer screen showed the picture of her caller.

This was the call she dreaded.

After pushing the button on her phone, she spoke into her headset. "Accounting, Jolene. How may I help you Santa?"

"Ho ho ho," she heard in her ear. On the screen Santa winked at her. "Jolene, how are you doing this lovely morning?"

"Ah . . . Just fine Santa, just putting the finishing touches on the annual report."

“Isn’t that a coincidence?” She heard the sparkle in Santa’s voice, saw the twinkle in his eyes. How could you not love Santa? “That’s what I was calling about. It’s already half-past April. Am I going to get the report before our annual stockholders meeting?”

“It’ll be done by noon today.”

“And, are you going to make an old man happy?”

This was the question she didn’t want to answer. After lunch she would have to sit down with the Big Guy and break the bad news. In spite of all of their cost cutting measures, they were in the red for the third year in a row. No dividends this year. The stockholders would not be happy.

“Let me just finish up here, Santa. Then we’ll go over it at our one o’clock.”

“Ho ho ho. Very good, Jolene. I’m looking forward to seeing you.”

It was an office, like any other office.

Almost.

For one thing, the furniture was tiny. Miniature cubicles filled with miniature desks and miniature chairs. The cubicle walls, a mere three feet high, left a voluminous overhead area in the large room. Fairies darted to and fro through the open space, carrying messages and packages from office to office.

Christmas music streamed from the speakers. Cubicles festooned with wreaths, snowmen and tinsel crowded around long corridors. Pictures of reindeer in various poses clung to the walls. The live Christmas tree in the lobby reached for the ceiling two floors above.

Elves rushed from office to cubicle, waving reports and spread sheets or lugging lap tops. High-pitched voices rose in an excited chatter, creating a constant cacophony. It was year-end in the Accounting Department.

Jolene had toiled for long years in the cloth-covered boxes. When she was promoted to assistant controller, she made it out of cubicle land. This was the big-time. She finally had her own office, but she always kept her door open. She liked hearing the cheery voices, the ebb and flow of workers outside her office. It made her feel a little less isolated.

Don't get the wrong idea. Her office was great. Cheery poinsettias lined her credenza. On a digital picture frame photos of her vacation to Cabo, of her nieces and nephews and family pictures slid on and off of the screen. On the side-table, her French press, coffee jar and Christmas mugs made up her own private coffee station.

Her back office wall was covered with pictures of her with Santa, The Easter Bunny, Jack Frost and other holiday celebrities. Her favorite was the picture with Elvis, in a sequin covered white jump suit. It was amazing that he could still shake it after all of these years.

Jolene gulped a deep breath, got up from her chair and strolled to her office door. She leaned against the frame for a moment, arms folded across her chest. God, how she hated this.

"Bethene," she called across the sea of cubicles. "May I see you for a moment? And bring the Reindeer file."

"Right there." Bethene, a dark-eyed elf with long green hair, scooped up a file folder from her desk and came running.

Jolene's usually jovial nature was destroyed by the news she had to take to Santa at one o'clock.

She was short for an elf. Her plump figure made her look round and the bright colors she chose to wear made her look like a beach ball. Unlike Bethene, with her long, pointed ears, Jolene's were short and rounded, obviously a throwback to some human genes in her pool.

Bethene was nice enough, a great employee, but her long (for an elf) legs and trim figure drove Jolene crazy. The fact that she was at least one hundred years Jolene's junior didn't help either.

"Let's go over those expenses again," Jolene said. "We have to be able to move some expenses to this year."

Reindeer costs were one of the major expenses for Christmas Inc. Ever since Santa decided to go public, cost cutting was the order of the day.

The IPO funded modernization at the North Pole. The new magnetic subway was incredible. Trams flew through the underground tunnels at fantastic speeds, cushioned on a bed of electromagnetic energy.

The new phone system wasn't such a big improvement. It only confused Jolene and most of the elves. Email came over the phones, phone messages showed up in email in-boxes. The phone buzzed and a message appeared on the computer screen at the same time. It froze most of the elves as they tried to decide which to answer. Redial never seemed to work and they had to dial outside of the exchange to contact the Help Desk. When they did get the Help Desk, they had to wade through a morass of dial one for this and two for that before they reached the internal support agents.

Then, because of the overwhelming influx of Canadian elves sneaking over the border, the new menu had a "For Canadian, press one, eh?" option. Jolene was angered that Canadian was even being spoken. Elfen had always been the language of the North Pole. They should pass a law making it the national language.

Then there was the new server farm and computer upgrades. They had thrown Christmas Inc. into chaos. No one could figure out how to do the most mundane tasks.

The robots were even worse. The paint shop had been converted, as had many of the production lines. The automation had thrown many elves out of work. The older elves didn't understand

the technology and were the first to go. Computer glitches slowed production and wasted material. Costs sky-rocketed.

But in spite of it all, the IPO had been a big hit. The *Wall Street Journal* called it the biggest IPO since Facebook. The stock prices soared.

Then it all came back to earth. Christmas Inc. was a Twentieth Century company struggling to make it in the Twenty-first Century. Labor was out of control. The International Brotherhood of Elves (Local #101) had a strangle-lock on Santa's workshops. Futures for reindeer food soared. The new health and pension plans were close to breaking the company.

And they had to show a profit for the stock holders. The annual dividends were all important. No dividend and stock prices tumbled, making Christmas Inc. ripe for a takeover.

Jolene read the business journals. She knew that both Hasbro and Mattel lusted after Christmas Inc. It wasn't so much the physical assets they wanted. It was the brand name. Whoever owned the Santa brand owned Christmas.

"Whatcha got?" Jolene tried to sound perky as she came back on task.

"I already gave you the straight scoop," Bethene answered. She dropped the file folder on Jolene's desk and settled elegantly into a chair.

Grr. . . Even sitting in a straight-backed chair in the Assistant Controller's office, Bethene looked like a princess.

"We need to find a way to reduce costs," Jolene said. "How about the reindeer food futures Santa bought? Since we aren't taking delivery on them until July, we can move the expense to this year can't we?"

Bethene let out a deep breath. "I don't like it. The expense was last year, even if we don't take delivery until this year. . . "

Jolene cut her off. "We have to make this statement look better."

“Jolene, you know we can’t fudge the numbers. We have to tell the truth. According to GAAP. . .
“

“Don’t *you* quote GAAP to *me*.” GAAP is the Generally Accepted Accounting Principles to which all accountants and organizations subscribe. “I was memorizing GAAP before you were born.” *Damn. She let her anger and fear get the best of her. She had to calm down. There had to be a way out of this mess.*

Bethene sat chastened in her chair. Her eyes looked down, her hands clinched in her lap. “Maybe we could.” Her voice was so small Jolene could hardly hear it. “There’s also the reindeer waste removal. If we really stretched our ethics, we could write that off as a capital expense. . . “

“That’s great. How much will that save us?”

“Not much. We’re talking less than a million dollars.”

“Crap.” Jolene sat back in her leather chair and looked at the ceiling. “That’s pocket change. We need to make some big changes.”

What else was there? The deposit on the new ERP system? That wouldn’t be implemented until next year. Could they put it off?

This was cooking the books. It was wrong. Not only was it wrong, it was illegal. Jolene knew that under Sarbanes-Oxley, Santa would have to sign off on it. It would make him criminally liable. He could end up in prison for signing false annual reports.

Jolene packed the annual report in her bag along with her lap top and began the trudge to Santa’s offices. Accounting was in Building Three, nearly a mile from Corporate Offices. She took two escalators underground and waited for a tram.

The new tram system was the envy of the world. With red, green, silver and golden cars designating their destinations, she merely had to step aboard the right car. *With today's news, it would be more appropriate to have black cars.*

The computer operated trams floated on a cushion of magnetism that also propelled them along their way. The massive amount of electricity needed to power the system strained the North Pole's power plants. *No wonder we have to install new dynamos.* It would cost millions. *One more expense to absorb.*

The brightly lit tunnels had mosaic murals of Christmas scenes covering its walls. There were little girls and boys opening presents, Papa bringing home a Christmas tree through heavy snow, the city decked out in Christmas lights. Each line had a different theme.

The car whooshed to a stop and Jolene disembarked. She stood in an almost cathedral-like chamber with high ceilings, elegant carved stone cornices and granite floors. This was the transportation hub of the North Pole.

She took a moving sidewalk from the tram system to the escalators. A waterfall dropped into a stream near the sign saying "Santa's Executive Offices." She stepped onto the escalator and was carried up and out of the station.

If there was a staircase, I bet it would have thirteen steps, she thought.

"Jo, how grand to see you." Santa's big arms pulled her into a bear hug. She missed the fur lining of his collar. Since Christmas Inc. had gone to a casual dress code, he almost always wore a brightly colored Hawaiian shirt and chinos. He only wore his red suit when expecting important visitors.

As always, the Big Guy met her in the lobby amidst the hustle and bustle of executive elves. He never kept an appointment waiting. Somehow, he knew just when you were going to walk through the door. *I wonder, Jolene thought, if maybe it has something to do with that naughty/nice thing?*

Santa's outer office reflected the mirth and magic of Christmas. He had done a major remodel before the IPO. A ten-foot tall snow globe sat in the center of the large ante-room. As you walked around it, the scene kept changing. From one angle, it was London in winter. Jolene took a few steps and was looking at a bright summer day at the Sydney Opera house. If she touched the globe, she saw her home town, the North Pole.

As Jolene stared into the globe a chill rippled down her spine. The snow swirled and she saw a new scene. It was midnight in a Midwestern town. A huge truck with a sleigh painted on the side and a smiling Chinese face wearing a Santa hat displayed on the back doors skulked through the streets. At each house, a crane on top of the truck swung a Chinese man dressed in a Santa suit onto the roof with a large red fur trimmed bag over his shoulders.

The Chinaman climbed out of the crane's basket and slid down the chimney.

Jolene sucked in a deep breath and the snow swirled again, bringing back the scene of the happy North Pole.

Everything was so life-sized and realistic. 3-D people moved around in the globe. If you looked hard enough, you could see inside the buildings at the warm Christmas scenes in homes and offices.

As Jolene turned away from the snow globe she saw that snow was piling up around the perimeter of the waiting room. A creek flowed along the back wall, water trickling over the snow-covered rocks. It should have made the room chilly, but somehow the snow didn't melt in the seventy-degree room. It must be some of that magic the Disney Imagineers did when they designed the building.

A little further along, Dasher and Prancer grazed tundra grass along the windows, totally oblivious to the work going on around them. Two elves stood guard with scoops and a bucket to make

sure that the reindeer didn't leave any calling cards on the ante-room floor. *They're going to need really big scoops to clean up the mess after I talk with Santa.*

The elves hustled back and forth through the scene. Everyone was busy, everyone with big smiles on their faces.

Smiles, Jolene thought, how could anyone be happy on a day like this? They just don't understand, do they?

Santa and Jolene passed by brightly wrapped boxes piled under the live Noble Fir. The tree was decorated with hand-made ornaments, twinkling LED lights and tinsel garlands. Snow showered down over the tree, but somehow never seemed to stick, never made puddles on the floor.

For more than two centuries Jolene had toiled in Santa's accounting department. She remembered when they kept ledgers with quill pens. In all that time, Santa had never been anything but respectful. He was like a favorite uncle. Any of the elves would gladly lay down their lives for him. His presence and charisma kept the North Pole humming.

"Santa, I'm afraid it isn't good."

"Don't look so glum. Come into my office. Let me get you a cup of chocolate." Santa always offered hot chocolate, although Jolene would have preferred coffee. "Let's settle down and take a hard look at things."

Jolene could never get enough of Santa's office. The room was immense, yet homey. It could be a Norman Rockwell painting. Dark wood paneling with intricately carved moldings covered the walls. There were no better craftsmen in the world than the elfin carpenters. The tin pressed ceiling gleamed from constant cleaning. A huge fire roared in the flagstone fireplace in the center of the room.

Sofas and a coffee table sat in front of the fireplace. A large book on baseball stadiums sat on the table. Jolene never understood Santa's fascination with baseball.

On each side of the fireplace, large windows framed by red velvet curtains opened out onto the view. Directly in front of Santa's office the tall candy cane pole with a rotating red light on it marked the precise location of the North Pole. Even in April, snow piled in large drifts against the buildings. Most of the workshops and offices were underground now, but the well maintained original buildings gave the North Pole the look of a Bavarian mountain village.

"Come in. Sit" Santa gestured towards the sofas by the fire place.

Jolene knew that he didn't like to do business at his huge mahogany desk. The desk was large enough for him to land his sleigh on. Winston, Santa's new Chief Marketing Officer, had insisted on the desk during the remodel and IPO. It gave Santa an air of importance, he said.

Santa preferred a casual approach. He would much rather sit on the sofa, a cup of hot chocolate in his hand and a plate of cookies on the coffee table.

The twinkle left Santa's eyes. "Well, what have you got for me?" Suddenly he seemed all business.

"It's not good." Jolene couldn't look Santa in the eye. "We're in the red again. This year we managed to cut it back to a billion dollars."

"A billion . . ." Santa sagged on the sofa. The air left his lungs in one huge sigh. "Well, at least it's better than last year. Maybe the stock holders will stick with us because we're making progress."

"Look, Santa, I know it's not my place." Jolene had rehearsed this speech all night. "You know Einstein's definition of insanity: Doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results."

"Oh yes, Albert. He was such an unhappy little boy."

"We have to change something. I have some ideas, but they should come from Sasquatch, he's the CFO."

Santa stood and paced behind the sofas. He stopped at his desk to snatch up his pipe and light it. As he walked, a wreath of smoke trailed behind his head like the exhaust of a steam locomotive.

“We’ve been doing business like this for centuries.” He spoke softly, to himself. Jolene felt like she was intruding on his inner thoughts. “Why is everything so different now?”

“Santa, the world’s changed. We’re in a global economy now. We can’t compete with China’s labor costs. Wal-Mart beats us on prices. UPS and FEDEX can deliver cheaper than us. Reindeer just aren’t competitive.

“And the six white boomers. Santa, we can’t afford to swap the reindeer for kangaroos in Australia. The cost of two delivery systems is killing us.

“You’re stretched too thin. Father Christmas, Saint Nicholas, Pere Noel, Viejo Pascuero, Weihnachtsmann, Babo Natale and all the rest. It’s just too much. You’ve got to consolidate. Choose a single identity and throw all of your marketing effort behind it.”

“I know Jolene. Thank you. I know all of that. But tradition. We can’t just walk away from centuries of tradition. And the customers won’t go for it. They’re married to their traditions too.”

“Well, what are you going to do? You know that we can’t keep going on like this. Another year like this one and we’re out of business.”

“Let’s get started, lady and gentlemen.” Santa, now attired in his full Santa regalia, gazed around the room.

The Christmas Inc. board room was nothing short of spectacular. Once again, Winston, the Chief Marketing Officer, had insisted on the show of elegance for the IPO.

The log walls gave the impression of an old-world hunting lodge but the ceiling was what appeared to be a crisp, clear night sky. Stars twinkled on the black background. Polaris, the North Star, was directly over head. A small waterfall trickled down one corner of the room and the stream lead off to Santa's anteroom.

The long conference table was hewn from a single, giant sequoia log smoothed and varnished to a mirror-like finish. Plush leather roller chairs surrounded the table. At the push of a button, the coffee station in the middle of the table disappeared into the table and a projector appeared in its place.

Santa clicked on the remote control and the projector hummed to life. The cover of the Christmas Inc. annual report hung suspended in air in 3-D.

"The graphics department did their usual magnificent job," the Tooth Fairy said. The only female in the room, she couldn't sit still. Like everyone else in the boardroom, she was in full uniform. Her pink tutu wouldn't stay down when she sat and she constantly fluttered her wings, much to Jack Frost's annoyance.

"I want to thank Sasquatch and his entire financial organization for another wonderful job," Santa said.

Everyone applauded politely. The large, hairy shape at the other end of the table nodded but didn't speak. He never said much anyway.

"However," Santa continued, "I want to jump right to the heart of the matter. We've had another losing year. That makes three in a row."

A large, unsurprised groan emanated from the directors. While this was not shocking news, it was still unwelcome.

"The good news is that all of our cost-cutting had some impact. Our loss was less than a billion dollars this year. That's a significant improvement."

“Still, a billion bucks is a billion bucks.” Yeti, the Abominable Snowman, shook his head. “We can’t keep going on like this. We have to make some drastic changes.”

Frosty, who never melted despite the room’s comfy temperature spoke up. “I agree. I want to bring up my proposal again to replace the reindeer”

“We’ve been through that before,” Santa said. “Reindeer are too big a part of the Christmas tradition. Our customers would never accept a sleigh drawn by burros.”

“But Santa,” Frosty pleaded, “The reindeer are one of our major expenses. Just think how much we could save if we hired some of the burros that have been sneaking across the border.”

“Out of the question,” Yeti yelled. Being the Chief Legal Officer, he kept a sharp eye on all legal matters. “You know that if we get caught hiring illegals, we could face some stiff penalties.”

“That would be a public relations disaster,” Winston spoke up. The marketing man, recently hired away from FaceBook, was one of the few humans in the room. “From a marketing point-of-view, I don’t even know how we would start selling donkeys.”

“First of all, we wouldn’t hire any burros without the proper paperwork,” Frosty countered.

“We all know that they can get a green card and Social Security card made anywhere.” Yeti brushed some imaginary dust off his furry white coat.

“That’s not our problem.” Small trickles of water ran down Frosty’s brow, a sure sign he was getting angry. “I don’t care where they get the papers, as long as we’re covered.” Frosty got up and waddled over to the snow lined brook. He scooped up a handful of snow and rubbed his brow. “Look, these are desperate times. We need to take desperate measures.”

“Mellow out, Baby.” Elvis spoke for the first time. “We haven’t even talked about the EPA’s new reindeer waste disposal regulations.”

“It’s the damn bail-out.” The Tooth Fairy’s voice was tiny but shrill. “Ever since we took the bail-out, we’ve had to comply with so many federal regulations, it’s crushing us. Building a new reindeer waste disposal plant will bankrupt us”

“Hey,” Rudolph spoke up for the first time. “Let’s not get personal”

Those were the days, Santa thought. Ever since I promoted Rudolph, nothing has gone smoothly on the Christmas run.

“Ah don’t know what the big deal is with the reindeer poop anyway,” Elvis chimed in. “Who care what happens with a hunka-hunka-hunka of burning poop.”

Nervous laughter twittered in the room.

“Let’s keep on track, people.” Santa had a way of keeping these meetings running.

“I think we should table the reindeer discussion.” Jack Frost spoke up. “We’ve been through this time and again. We need to look at more important matters.”

“Like what?” Frosty asked frostily.

“Like the economy, Ice Head.” Jack Frost glared at the snowman. “Ever since the recession hit, we’ve been in a tail spin.”

“What do you expect?” the Tooth Fairy asked. “So many families have lost their jobs, they can’t provide Christmas for their kids anymore. Even some of those that still have their jobs have had to take cuts in pay. We’re stretched too thin. I think we’re going to have to draw the line somewhere. We can’t service everybody.”

“Now wait a minute there.” Santa’s voice rose an octave. “You all know our mission: To provide Christmas love and joy to ALL of the world’s children. We’ve done that for centuries. We’re not about to change now.”

“But Santa,” Tooth Fairy protested, “We don’t have the resources. You’re asking more and more from the elves and giving them less to work with.”

“They’re the best in the world at what they do.” Santa’s eyes flashed. “We just have to get them to push a little harder.”

“They’re already working eighty to a hundred hours a week. During peak season last year, most of the elves slept in the dormitories and never even went home to see their families.” The Tooth Fairy’s wings buzzed so fast that she lifted off of her chair. “Santa, that’s an unsustainable work schedule. The pressure to increase production is killing productivity. The longer hours the elves work, the faster you expect them to produce, the more mistakes they make. We’re actually making fewer toys per day than we were before.”

“Which brings me back to my point,” Jack Frost cut in. “It’s the economy, stupid. Sure, the major corporations are showing record profits and the stock market is going up, but it hasn’t trickled down to the working public yet. This is a jobless recovery. If we can’t get people working, then we’ll continue to be in this mess. I think the only chance we have is to hire folks to lobby Congress. They have to stimulate the part of the economy that produces jobs. Remember the cash for clunkers. That got Detroit working again.”

“We never have and never will become involved in politics,” Santa said. “We’re all about children, not lobbying and lawmaking. “What time is it? What happened to the cookies and cocoa?”