

# Santa and The Canal by Robert Merrill

Once upon a Christmas Eve while walking along the canal south of Lock Seven, a strange and wondrous thing happened. The night sky became clear and the wind stopped. It had turned into a perfect Christmas Eve.

Out of the silence, bells could be heard. They became louder with every second. Then they stopped.

I glanced in the dry canal bottom and gasped in wonder. It was Santa Claus and his reindeer. Scurrying down the bank, I approached the man in the bright red suit. He was surprised but happy to say hello in that jolly voice we've all come to know. He informed me that he was quite busy and just stopped to adjust his load of presents, and really didn't have time to talk, but promised that after Christmas we would get together for a chat. Then, in a wink of an eye, he and his reindeer rose from the frozen canal bottom and were gone. The sound of sleigh bells trailed off in the distance. The crisp crunch from my boots on the canal floor and the sound of my breath was all that could be heard.

Christmas passed. New Years Eve came and left. I settled into a normal winter way of life, watching skiing on the television. The chance meeting with Santa Claus was all but forgotten. Then, without notice, I heard bells ringing and found myself sitting across from jolly St. Nick himself. With another wink of his eye, a mug of hot chocolate appeared beside me. I was there, at the North Pole, having hot chocolate with Mr. S. Claus.

Feeling like a school kid again, the questions coming from my mouth were endless. Santa couldn't get a word in. He snapped his fingers to get my attention.

“Slow down you’re making my head turn faster than a spinning top. To answer your first question about seeing me in that empty section of the canal, it’s like I told you then, I stop there each year to adjust the load of presents for all the boys and girls. I don’t want to lose anything you know.”

"Has anyone ever caught you before?"

“You’re the first, but the people who run the canal know I’m there. They’ve been monitoring me since 1932. There is a phone number you can call to check on my progress, or didn’t you know that?”

“No, I didn’t know.” I replied.

“Oh yes, and how’s your hot chocolate?”

“The best.” I answered. I continued my questions, “The presents you were adjusting, just between you and me Santa, how, I mean how do you do it?”

Santa smiled, “It takes all year. We’ve become so busy we had to start a new workshop in the Antarctic. I’ll let you in on a little secret; the scientists have it all wrong. The coloured light you see at the North and South poles, it’s not something in the air; it’s the magical glow off mountains of toys. It gets so bright the elves have to wear goggles. Come, I’ll give you a quick tour. We’ve already started on next Christmas.”

I followed the jolly bearded fellow, who was dressed only in red pants, a white long sleeved shirt and black suspenders, to a large wooden door. A sign nailed to the door alerted those entering that Elves were at work. Santa handed me a pair of goggles. As I walked through the door, the sounds of bells tingling, hammers tapping and gears creaking could be heard from every corner. Multitudes of bright colours surrounded me. They became brighter as we moved

through the room. Each movement of Santa's Elves left behind a rainbow trail and magical sparkles. I tried to rub my eyes but the goggles got in the way. It was an amazing sight.

"You know young man you were very lucky that night. I was breaking in a new apprentice reindeer. You're one of the first to see him in action. His name is Astor and he's from Comet's herd. He was born at RRFD Antarctic."

"What is RRFD?" I asked.

"Reindeer Research Facility Diefenbaker, our newest facility. When we expanded our toy production in the Antarctic the reindeer came with us. Did you know there are three herds? The main herd is right here where we are now. The North Pole. There's one in Northern Europe and the third is at RRFD in the Antarctic." again, I was amazed.

"Is he here, can I meet him?"

"I'm guessing you mean Rudolph."

"Yes Rudolph. May I? I mean if it's not too much of an imposition?"

"Come, his room is this way."

"He gets his own room?"

"Well of course." Santa laughed in a jolly full belly laugh. "everyone likes to have their own room, no more drafty old stables for my reindeer. Here we are. I'll just knock."

In silver and gold lettering, the name, Rudolph, arched across the door. A few taps and the door magically disappeared. I found myself standing face to face with the reindeer of my childhood. Rudolph is and always will be a star. I gazed into his face and sparkling eyes. His antlers were almost touching the ceiling. I stood in wonder at his majesty. In mere seconds, I was

informed that our time was up. As I walked out of his room, I looked back over my shoulder and saw him shake his head goodbye.

Sitting back down in the same chair I arrived in, I looked up at Santa. He gave me a big smile. In the wink of an eye and before you could say Santa Claus, I found myself sitting in my family room in my own big comfortable chair. Feeling a tap on my shoulder, my wife was telling me to take my ski goggles off and drink my hot chocolate before it gets cold. Was it a dream?

I visit the canal every year on Christmas Eve. I hear the jingle of the sleigh bells but no Santa appears. The mystery and wonder continues.