

## The night Horatio saved Christmas

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Illustrations: James Murray, John Mahoney, Stephanie Wells

IT'S THE NIGHT before Christmas and fat snowflakes are falling thick and fast from the black sky. Everything - the trees, the fields, the houses and barns and chicken coops, the pickup trucks parked in the front yards - everything is covered with a soft blanket of snow.

There are no lights to be seen anywhere on the farms and in the villages around Lake Memphremagog. It is dark, very dark, and very quiet. All of the boys and girls, mothers and fathers, aunts, uncles and cousins, and all of their friends and neighbors, are sound asleep, dreaming of the fun they'll have on Christmas morning.

Albert the Woodsman snuggles deeper under the covers. Farmer John smiles in his sleep and rolls over in

his narrow bed. Winn the Maple Sugar Maker is snoring loudly, dreaming of the maple fudge he has make for Horatio's Christmas present.

Down in the valley, in Mary Ellen's barn, it's warm and peaceful. Joy the Filly and Lady the Cow are dozing in their box stalls, and Pigger is stretched out on the clean straw in her pen. In the yard, side by side in their snug dog houses, Big Dog, Little Dog, and Horatio snooze and dream of Christmas dinner.



Yes, it is very quiet but if you listen carefully, I mean close your eyes and really open your ears, you can hear, high, high up in the dark sky, the jingle of sleigh bells.

That means one thing and one thing only -- Santa Claus is almost here.

Earlier this night at the North Pole, Santa and his many helpers piled his sleigh high with bags and boxes and bundles of gifts. There are tin drums for banging and teddy bears for cuddling, bold, brassy bugles for blowing loud and long, beautiful bongos and books of all shapes and sizes for kids of all ages. There are red things and green things and blue and yellow and purple things, and a great big thing covered with orange polka dots. Why, there aren't enough fingers and toeses and noses in the

Three Villages to even begin to count all the goodies in Santa's sleigh.

Santa has visited almost every home in Quebec and stuffed the stockings and loaded the Christmas trees with gifts. He has just a few more homes to visit before he gets to the valley where Horatio and all his friends live.

"Let's go down, fellows!" he calls to his reindeer, and down, down, down they glide -- Dasher, Dancer, Donner and Blitzen, Comet and Cupid, Prancer and Vixen, and Rudolph and Ambrose.

Ambrose? Ambrose who? How did he get into this story?

Well, Ambrose the Antelope, that's who. Ambrose is Rudolph's cousin and he's visiting during the Christmas holidays so tonight he came along for the ride.

The sleigh touches down in Tomifobia as soft as a duck feather. Santa jumps nimbly to the ground, shoulders his sack of gifts and quickly delivers them to every home in the village. He hops back into the sleigh.

"Let's hit the road, guys!"

Up, up they climb into the swirling snow. In a split second they're over the house tops and out of sight, and still climbing.

The nine reindeer and the lone antelope race through the snowflakes, heading toward Horatio's valley. Santa

is busy stuffing this sack with presents for Big Dog and Little Dog and all the other folks who live nearby. Santa turns in the sleigh and reaches for a bundle of bones tied with a gigantic red ribbon.

"Horatio and his buddies will love the yummy taste of these Christmas bones," he tells the team.

"They sure will, Santa," they answer.

"Oh, indeed," says Ambrose. "They look so good I wouldn't mind having a chew myself."

The sleigh flies on through the night. Santa opens his sack so he can drop in the bundles of bones. He misses. The bones tumble over the side of the sleigh and disappear into the black night.

"Whoops!" exclaims Santa. He lunges for the bones.

And then the worst thing you can imagine happens.

Santa falls out of the sleigh. He is falling head over heels, faster and faster through the snowflakes, through the dark night.

"Help!" he yells. "Donner, Blitzen! Rudolph! Help!"

But no one hears Santa call for help. The nine reindeer and Ambrose are zipping through the sky to Horatio's house, the sleigh bells are a-jingling and they are all happily humming Christmas carols. They don't know that disaster has struck, and that maybe there won't be any more Christmases, ever again.

Santa is a red blur now, spinning toward the frozen earth.



"What will happen to Christmas?" Santa shouts. "What about all the boys and girls?"

No one hears Santa.

Down below, in the hayfield near the deep woods between Albert's famous sawmill and Mary Ellen's small farm, there is what appears to be a large pile of snow. But really it's a stack of big round hay bales that Farmer John has stored for the winter.

And Santa lands smack dab on top of the hay. He lies there on his back, snow falling on his face and beard, trying to catch his breath. The gift-wrapped bundle of bones for Horatio and his friends are beside him, poking

up out of the snow.

"Whew," says Santa. "That was lucky those bales of hay were there. But how am I going to catch up with the sleigh? It looks as if Christmas is going to be late this year."

At this very moment Santa's team and his sleigh are passing over Albert's house. Santa isn't there to tell the team to land so they push on.

"That's strange," thinks Blitzen. "I wonder if Albert misbehaved this year."

Comet looks at Cupid and rolls here eyes. "You never know," she says.

The sleigh is now over Farmer John's place. Still no command to land.

"Aren't we going down, Santa?" asks Rudolph. There isn't any answer. "Santa?" Silence. Rudolph turns to look at Santa. The sleigh is empty.

"Santa's gone!" he cries.

All the team turns and looks at the empty sleigh.

"Santa! Santa! Where are you, Santa? What about Christmas? The boys and girls need you, Santa! We need you, too!"

If there is anyone awake in the valley and if they are listening, they will surely hear them calling for Santa Claus, but it is quiet in the valley and the snow is falling

heavily and everyone is sound asleep.

Well, almost everyone. Little Dog stirs, his short, pointy ears go up. His eyes are still closed, but he frowns.

"What's that?" he thinks. "Who's yelling?"

Little Dog opens one eye and peers out the door of his small house. "It's snowing," he says. He stretches and goes outside. He sticks out his tongue, catches a snowflake and feels it melt. He cocks his head and listens intently. Far overhead he hears the faint tinkle of sleigh bells.



"Hey!" he says to himself. "Good old Santa is on his way."

And then he thinks, "But what is all that yelling about up there? I'd better wake up Big Dog. He'll figure it out."

"Whazzat?" mumbles Big Dog as Little Dog shakes him. "Whazzamatter?" He is still half asleep.

"Something's wrong in the sky," says Little Dog. "You'd better come outside."

Big Dog pokes his head through the door and his wet,

black nose is soon covered with snow.

"Little Dog, is this your idea of a joke?" he asks, just a little grumpily.

"No, no joke, Big Dog. Come outside and listen. Something strange is going on up there."

The empty sleigh is directly over the farm now, and the team is flying very low and shouting for Santa. The sleigh bells are jingling crazily as they fly this way and that in their search.

"Santa! Santa Claus!" they call. "Where are you?"

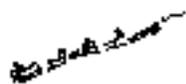
Big Dog looks at Little Dog. "I hear it now," he says. "Someone is calling for Santa."

"We'd better wake Mary Ellen," says Little Dog.

They bark loudly, Big Dog in his deep, gruff voice and Little Dog in a high-pitched yip-yip-yip. A light comes on in Mary Ellen's bedroom. She sticks her head out of the window.

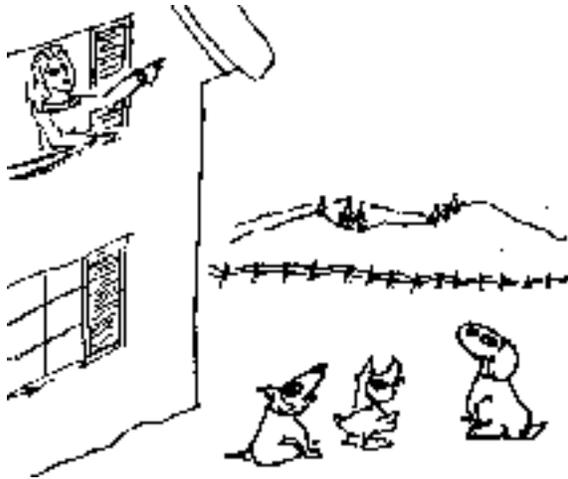
"What's wrong? Why are you barking at this time of night?"

"Yeah, what's all this racket?" quacks Horatio, who has just stuck his head out of the door of his house. "How do you expect a dog to get a good night's sleep?"



"Listen!" says Big Dog.

"It sounds like sleigh bells,"



says Mary Ellen. "It must be Santa Claus and all the reindeer."

"Why are they yelling for Santa?" asks Horatio.

Just then from out of the snow-filled sky nine frantic reindeer and a babbling antelope hauling a gleaming red and gold sleigh filled to overflowing with bags and boxes and bundles lands right next to Horatio's house.

"We saw your light," they all cry at once. "We came right down."

"Hi, fellows," quacks Horatio. "Merry Christmas!"

"Oh, it's terrible," they say. "You've got to help!"



"What's terrible?" asks Mary Ellen. "Where's Santa?"

"He's gone! That's what's terrible! Santa's gone! Disappeared! Vanished into thin air!"

"Gone?" quacks Horatio.

"Disappeared?" barks Big

Dog.

"But what about Christmas?" yips Little Dog.

"If we don't find Santa there won't be any Christmas!" Rudolph warns them.

"Let's all calm down," says Mary Ellen. "Start from the beginning. Rudolph, you speak first."

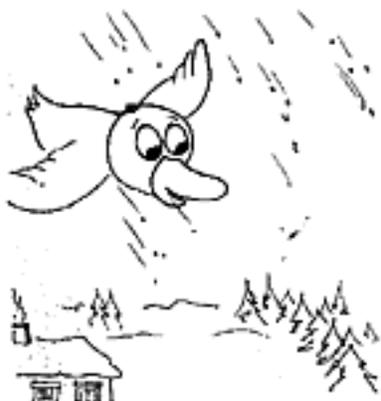
So Rudolph tells them about flying away from Tomifobia village and then discovering that Santa was missing when they didn't stop at Albert's famous sawmill or at Farmer John's place.



"I thought it was strange when we didn't land at Farmer John's house," Cupid adds.

"We should start searching for Santa immediately," barks Big Dog. "Little Dog and I will go through the woods towards the sawmill."

"I'll telephone Albert and Farmer John," says Mary Ellen. "They can pick up Wynn at the sugarbush and look for Santa on their snow machines."



"I'm going to have a look around, too," quacks Horatio. And quick as you please he flies off into the dark, snowy night.

"Horatio is so brave to go off alone on a night like this," says Ambrose,

with a shiver.

"Aren't you fellows hungry?" asks Mary Ellen. "How about a nice feed of clover hay while we wait for Santa?" She unharnesses them from the sleigh. "Let's go to the barn and I'll toss some hay down from the loft."

While Rudolph and Ambrose and the rest of the team stand in a circle, hungrily munching their late-night snack, Big Dog and Little Dog are casting about in ever-widening circles and sniffing the air, trying to pick up Santa's scent.

"Do you smell anything yet?" asks Little Dog.

"Not yet," Big Dog answers. "Let's go this way."

They don't know it but at this moment Santa is sitting on the pile of hay bales, the bundle of bones in his lap. He is covered with snow now and you can't see much of his red suit. Santa is beginning to look like Frosty the Snow Man.

"I hope someone comes pretty soon," thinks Santa. "I have to get those presents delivered before morning. The children have waited all year for Christmas. I can't let them down."

Meanwhile, Albert the Woodsman has just roared into Farmer John's yard on his powerful snow-breaking machine. Winn the Maple Sugar Maker is on the back. Farmer John has already warmed up his snow machine while waiting for his friends.

"This news about Santa Claus is just awful," says Farmer John. "We have to find him right off."

"Where should we start?" asks Albert. "What's your plan?"

"Let's go through the woods to the field where I stored the hay this summer. Then we'll search the area toward the village. Mary Ellen said that's where Rudolph told her they had last seen Santa."



They switch on their powerful headlights and ride off into the snowy night, their sharp eyes peeled for a little old man in a red suit.

Up in the sky, flying just above the tree tops, Horatio is desperately seeking Santa.

"Santa! Santa Claus! Can you hear me?"

There is no answer.

"Santa! It's Horatio! I'm coming, Santa!"

Still no answer, but far off to his right he sees two pinpricks of light bobbing through the woods. "There's Albert and Winn and Farmer John," he thinks. Then far

off to his left he hears very faintly barking and yipping.  
"And there's Big Dog and Little Dog."

"Don't worry, Santa!" he shouts. "We're coming to find you! There'll be Christmas for everyone this year!"

Horatio is now flying a search pattern over the field near the sawmill. It is still snowing heavily and it's so dark that it is difficult to see. He is gliding just a few feet above the ground and peering every which way. All of a sudden a mound of snow looms in front of him.

"Oh, oh!" he exclaims. "Just missed it! Those must be Farmer John's hay bales."

He flies on, reaches the end of the field, turns and flies back toward the hay bales. As he passes the snowy mound he realizes that it isn't as smooth as it should be -- there is a funny little lump on top.

"That's weird," says Horatio. "Hay bales aren't supposed to look like that."

He wheels around and flies back to the mound and lands on top of it.

"Ouch! Get off my head!"

The top of the snow-covered mound explodes. Standing there, very indignant, is a little old man with a long, white beard. He is wearing a



bright red suit. And sitting on his head is a very surprised duck with a green head who thinks he is a dog.



Horatio tumbles off Santa's head and lands in a heap at his feet.

"Santa!" he says "It's you! You're OK!"

"Horatio! What are you doing way out here on a night like this?"

"Looking for you, Santa. We've all been looking for you...Big Dog and Little Dog and Winn and Albert and Farmer John. We've been worried, Santa!"

"Well, I've been worried a bit myself, Horatio. I've just got to find the sleigh and the team and deliver all those presents. Everyone is counting on me, Horatio. They've waited all year."

"Don't worry, Santa! The team is at our farm. I'll get you there."

"How, Horatio? It's a long way from here to there and I have to hurry. Christmas morning is coming fast."

"Stay right where you are, Santa. I'll get help."

Horatio flies off into the darkness, back towards the place in the woods where he last saw the headlights of the snow machines. When he reaches the edge of the

woods he hears barking. Soon he locates Big Dog and Little Dog.



"I've found him!" he tells them. "I've found Santa Claus!" And he tells them the story of his search and how he landed right on top of Santa's head.

"Santa is in a rush to get going," Horatio says. "We've got to find Albert and Wynn and Farmer John. They can give him a ride back to the farm."

Just then they hear the muffled throb of the snow machines and soon Albert and Winn and Farmer John ride into the small clearing in the woods.

"Any luck, boys?" asks Albert.

"I found him," says Horatio. "He's in the field. Sitting on your bales of hay, Farmer John."

"Is Santa OK?" asks Wynn.

"He's find," answers Horatio. "But he's in a real hurry to get moving. Santa's worried that Christmas will be late this year."

"Let's go rescue Santa," says Farmer John. "Big Dog,

you ride with me. Little Dog, you get on with Albert and Winn. Horatio, you fly on ahead and tell Santa that we're coming."

And off they go.

Back at the farm the team has finished eating and resting. Rudolph looks concerned.

"What time is it, Mary Ellen? It must be very late. Where are the guys and where is Santa Claus?"

"Don't worry, Rudolph," she says. "Santa is fine. They'll have him here soon."

"Mary Ellen is right," Ambrose tells them. "It won't be long before we'll be on our way. Why, I'll bet Santa's on his way right this minute."

Ambrose is almost right, for on the far side of the forest Horatio is just touching down on the hay bales, next to Santa.

"I'm back, Santa," he says. "Don't worry, help is on the way. Albert and Winn and Farmer John will be here any minute."

And sure enough, just as he finishes speaking the two snow machines roar out of the trees, their twin headlights slashing through the falling snow and the dark night.

"There's Santa!" barks Big Dog. "And Horatio, too!"

"What's that bundle on Santa's lap?" yips Little Dog. "It

looks like bones!"



Santa stands on top of the hay bales. He is grinning and waving with both arms. He shakes hands and paws all around. "Big Dog! Little Dog! Farmer John! And my good friends Winn and Albert! Am I ever glad to see you fellows! Thanks for coming!"

He climbs onto the snow machine with Farmer John and Big Dog, then gets off. "Wait a minute!" says

Santa. He walks back to the mound and picks up the bundle of bones, still wrapped in the bright red ribbon. "I don't want to forget this gift. It's for some very special friends of mine."

"Now then," says Santa. "I have many places to visit tonight so let's be moving on. Off, off and away!"

And away they go across the field and into the woods, merrily singing Christmas songs. Santa leads them in "Jingle Bells" and "Rudolph, the red-nosed Reindeer." Horatio, who is flying just above them, harmonizes with Big Dog and Little Dog on their favorite holiday tune, "All I want For Christmas is a Big Fat Bone."

Ambrose perks up his ears. Antelopes have very good hearing and he is the first to hear the snow machines coming through the woods.

"They're coming!" he shouts. "They're coming."

The two snow machines drive into the yard and Santa Claus hops off. He is immediately surrounded by nine happy reindeer and one glad antelope.

"It's Santa!" they shout as they dance around him. "Santa's back! Oh, Santa, are you OK? We've been so worried! We were afraid you were gone forever!"



"I'm fine, fine!" says Santa. "Thanks to Farmer John's hay bales I wasn't hurt when I landed in the field. And thanks to Horatio I'm here now. I don't mind telling you, I was pretty worried about Christmas for a time there."

"So was I," says Rudolph.

"Me, too," adds Ambrose.

"And I was worried too," barks Big Dog. "Think of how disappointed all the boys and girls would be if there wasn't any Christmas tomorrow morning...or ever again.

"Yeah, and all the dogs, too," yips Little Dog, who has his eye on the gift-wrapped bones Santa holds in his hands.



Santa looks at the bones and chuckles. "Bones," he says with a grin. "That's how I got in trouble in the first place." Santa shakes his head, then looks at his team. "Are



you fellows rested and ready to travel.?"

"I'm ready," says Donner.

"Me too," says Blitzen.

"Let's go," says Dancer and Dasher.

"We're all ready to go," says Ambrose.

"OK team," says Santa. "Take your places in the harness. Farmer John, will you and Albert hook them up while I get all your presents out of the sack? It will save me some very precious time."

"Sure thing, Santa," says Farmer John.

Santa picks up his bag of gifts and asks Mary Ellen and Winn to help him hand them out. "There's quite a few in her for all you valley folks," he chuckles.

"We have something here for you, Santa," says Mary Ellen. Winn brings out a gaily-wrapped package he has been hiding behind his back and hands it to Santa.

"A gift for me?" says Santa. "Well, that's really nice of you folks."

Santa starts to open the box and everyone gathers around to watch. Santa looks inside and starts to chuckle.

"What a wonderful present!" he exclaims. "Why didn't I think of that a long time ago?"

Horatio and Little Dog are craning their necks, trying to see Santa's present but they're so low to the ground that they can't make it out.

"What is it, Santa?" asks Horatio.

"Yeah, Santa, tell us quick," says Little Dog.

"A seat belt," says Santa. "And you can all bet that I'm going to wear it from now on!"

"Where to next, Santa?" asks Horatio. "Where's your next stop?"

"Beebe," says Santa. "Then we'll visit Stanstead and Rock Island, and then cross the border and go to all the homes in Derby Line and Derby and Newport and Coventry...oh, it's a long, long list, Horatio. I think we had better get moving."

Santa climbs into the sleigh and picks up the reins. Then he puts them down and smiles.

"Oops," he says. "I don't want to forget this present."

Santa picks up the bundle of bones and tosses them to Little Dog. "Here, catch," he says. "These are for you and Big Dog and Horatio, my three favorite dogs in the whole world."

"Thanks, Santa," yips Little Dog.

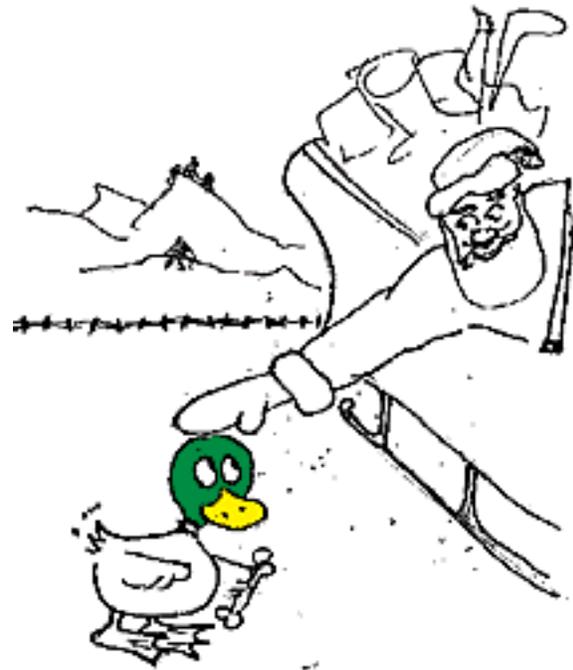
"Many thanks," barks Big Dog. "Have a safe journey!"

"Thanks a lot," quacks Horatio. "We're very glad you

always remember how much us dogs like bones."

"Glad that you like 'em, boys. I certainly will never forget these particular bones. Mary Ellen, thank you for all your help and for feeding the team. Albert Winn, Farmer John...thanks for getting me back here. I truly appreciate what you did for me, and for Christmas."

Santa gets back in the sleigh, buckles up for safety, then leans out and pats Horatio on his beautiful green head.



"And thank you, my friends. All of the girls and boys everywhere owe you a special vote of thanks."

You can't tell by looking at him, but under his green feathers Horatio is blushing.

"Oh, Santa," he says. "It was nothing. Any dog would have done the same thing for you. Any time."

"Christmas is waiting," says Santa. "Let's go, team. Up, up and away. Now, Donner. Now, Blitzen, Up Comet...Cupid...Rudolph...and you too, Ambrose."

Santa's sleigh is out of sight so fast it makes your head spin. You start to wonder if he and his nine tiny reindeer and one lone antelope were ever really there. Or did you just wake up from what started out as a terrible

nightmare and has just ended as a very nice dream.

It is still very dark and very quiet and the snow is falling heavily. All you can hear is the sound of your own breathing. And then, from very high up in the black sky, you hear the faint sound of the sleigh bells and a voice calling out... "Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night...especially to you, Horatio.. a very, very merry Christmas..."



And then it is very quiet again.

**THE END**

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