

## Santa's Early Christmas

Santa Claus finished buttoning his thickest vest, pulled on his pullover and cardigan, stepped into his big red coat, and fetched his scarf from the hall.

"What a night to go out!" he said as the hail clattered against the windows, and snowflakes flurried under the door. "This is a night for sitting by the fire and eating hot buttered toast." He pulled on his woolliest socks, knocked the mud off his boots and fumbled for his gloves.

Looking at himself in the mirror, he thought, "No wonder everybody thinks I'm fat. Look at all the layers of clothes I've got on."

Outside, Rudolf the reindeer was impatient to be on his way. It was so cold that the runners of the sleigh were freezing to the ground. Santa checked that all his presents were aboard and set off at a gallop through the gusts of snow across the unfriendly night sky.

"Ho, ho, ho," he said loudly, but he did not feel any jollier. "I can't seem to put my heart into Christmas this year, Rudolf. Why do they always have it in the middle of winter, when the weather is so awful?"

Rudolf blew on the sleigh bells, which had frozen solid. "I agree," he said. "This isn't travelling weather. A reindeer could break a leg."

They came to a halt on a steep roof, slippery with ice. Rudolf looked sideways at Santa bulging with his warm clothes. "Couldn't you give the chimney a miss this year?" he asked.

Santa shrugged his shoulders, "How else can I get in? Do you want me knock on the door?"

Swinging first one foot and then the other into the chimney pot, he held his nose and dropped down into the dark below.

But he was wearing one vest too many. He was just too plump in all his woollies to slide down into the grate and out into the room. Wedged tight, he wriggled and grunted and breathed in to make himself thinner. The old fire was still smouldering in the grate below, and wisps of smoke made him cough. The soles of his boots were getting very warm.

It was only when Rudolf tipped the sack of presents down on top of him that Santa popped out of the chimney like a cork out of a bottle. He lay on the hearth rug, surrounded by parcels and sweets.

“Never again” he muttered. “Never again. Christmas will just have to be early next year.”

Even after he had filled the children’s stockings and climbed back to the roof he was still complaining. “Never again! I’m coming early next year!”

“How early?” said Rudolf, disappearing under a drift of snow.

“*July!*” said Santa. And he felt better just thinking about it. Ho, ho, ho!”

July came round all too quickly. Santa was so busy getting all the presents ready in time that he did not even go on holiday. “Well, they do say a change is as good as a rest,” he told Rudolf. “I’m really looking forward to Christmas this summer. Get out the six-wheeled cart. We don’t need to take that heavy old sleigh.”

Then Santa had a shave – he only grew a beard in winter to keep his face warm – and got dressed in his favourite jeans, T-shirt and sandals. He looked in the mirror. “Fit as a whippet.” he exclaimed and bounded out of the house.

Because of the heatwave that July, the rooves were all dry and easy to climb. The six-wheeled cart was light to pull and Rudolf was still fresh when they landed on the first roof.

Its narrow chimney was no problem this year. Santa was down it as easily as a letter down a pillar-box. He stood on the hearth rug, sneezing soot out of his nose.

But, looking around him, he soon saw that things were not quite right. There was no glass of sherry or piece of cake waiting to welcome Father Christmas. There was no Christmas tree. There were no decorations. There were none of the presents that Mums and Dads buy for each other. The house looked lonely and bare.

Gradually, the truth dawned on him. The family had gone on holiday! "How dare they! They've gone on holiday and never a thought for me!"

Worst of all, there were no stockings or pillow cases hung up. He had to battle back up the chimney with all the presents.

"They weren't expecting me!" he said as he struggled out of the chimney pot, sweating with the heat. "They've gone on holiday. Would you believe it?"

Rudolf was not paying attention. He was troubled by swarms of horse flies and gnats and mosquitoes. "You don't get flies like this in winter." he grumbled, flicking his reindeer tail.

It was the same at every house. Either the family was away on holiday or, worse still, the children were lying awake because of the heat. More than once, Santa had to dodge back up a chimney for fear of being seen. One family even called the police when they heard strange noises in the chimney.

"A burglar," they said, over the telephone. "And we think there's another one on the roof."

"Never again!" said Santa, leaping into the six-wheeled cart and galloping hard until sunrise. The undelivered presents tilted and toppled behind him. "Mistaken for burglars! Whatever next? Never again."

So, Santa finally decided that to deliver all the presents properly, he would have to go out as usual on Christmas Eve. He buttoned up his thickest vest, his jumper, cardigan and red, furry coat, then pulled on his scarf and gloves. Rudolf dragged out the heavy sleigh and they galloped through the pelting snow without either of them saying a word.

Santa did not feel like yelling "Ho, ho, ho!" In fact he could not manage even a single "ho". He had forgotten to put on a second pair of socks. His teeth began to chatter.

When they came to the roof with the narrow chimney, Santa tightened his belt, put a sack over his shoulder and sat like an egg in an egg cup, on top of the chimney pot. "I don't know why I b-b-bother," he mumbled as he struggled to squeeze down inside. Then he plunged out of sight.

Downstairs in the living room, ten paperchains leaped across the ceiling like ten paper rainbows. A tall fir tree stood in a red barrel, its arms outstretched to balance a hundred coloured lights. Its needles were wreathed with silver tinsel. A white light sprang through the windows off the crisp snow outside, and lit the writing on fifty Christmas cards: *Season's Greetings...Best Wishes...With lots of love...*

*For Santa*, said the note on the table alongside a glass of sherry and a piece of cake. Santa ate and drank and looked around him with a new, glowy feeling.

Upstairs the children were sleeping snuggled under red bedclothes. A stocking hung at the foot of each bed – with a special Christmas card addressed *just to him*.

“Ah, isn’t Christmas lovely,” he sighed to himself, and a lump in his throat stopped him saying a quiet ho, ho, ho.

He went back up to the roof. The climb did not seem so hard and his winter whiskers *did* stop the soot going up his nose. “I’m sorry Rudolf,” he said, emerging from the chimneypot, “but in future I’m going to make *all* my deliveries on Christmas Eve.”

Rudolf did not seem to be listening. He was staring out across the snowy rooftops at the frosty stars. A tinsel moon shook to the sound of the church bells as they rang in Christmas Day.

“Ho, ho, ho,” said the reindeer under his breath. Isn’t Christmas lovely!”