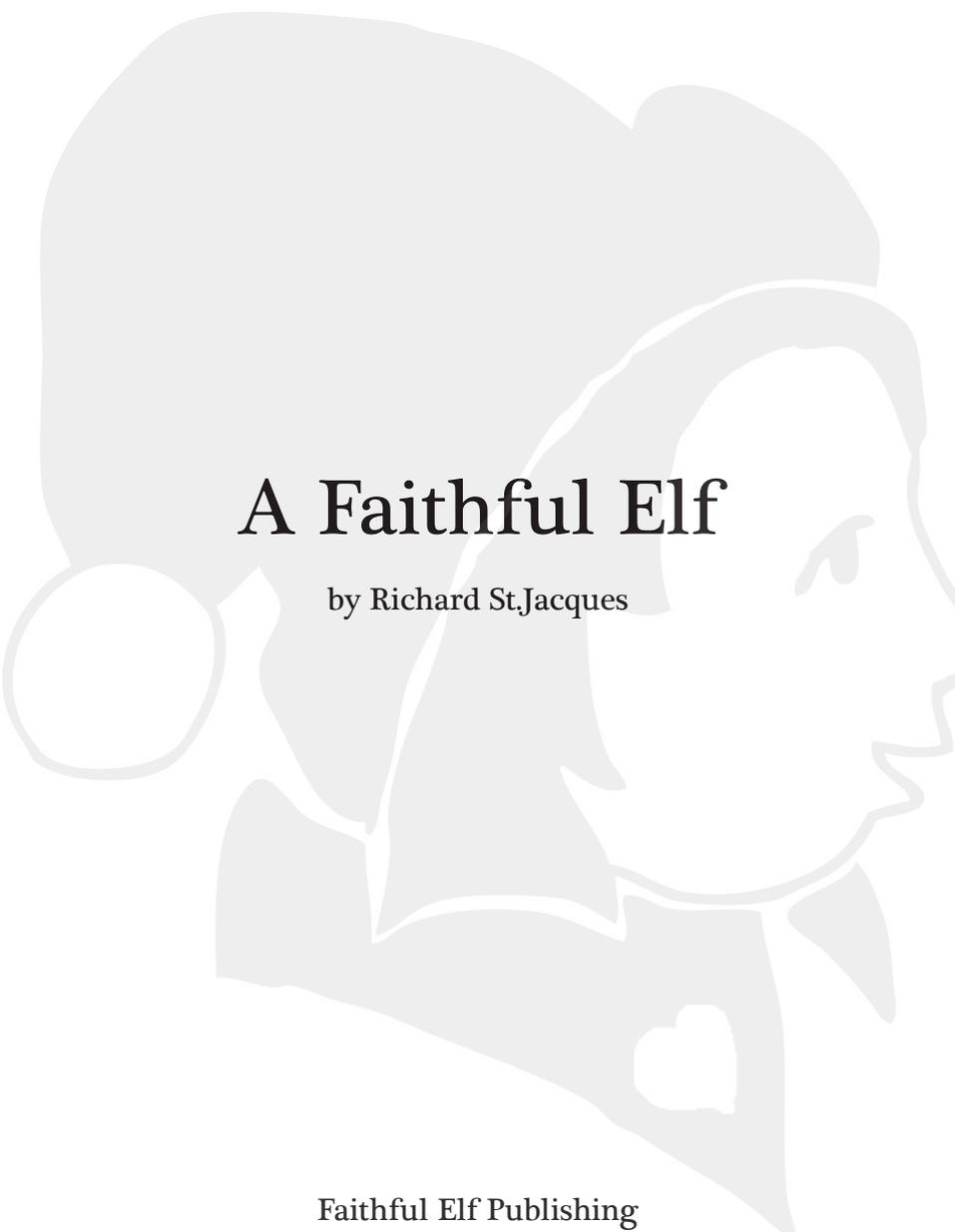




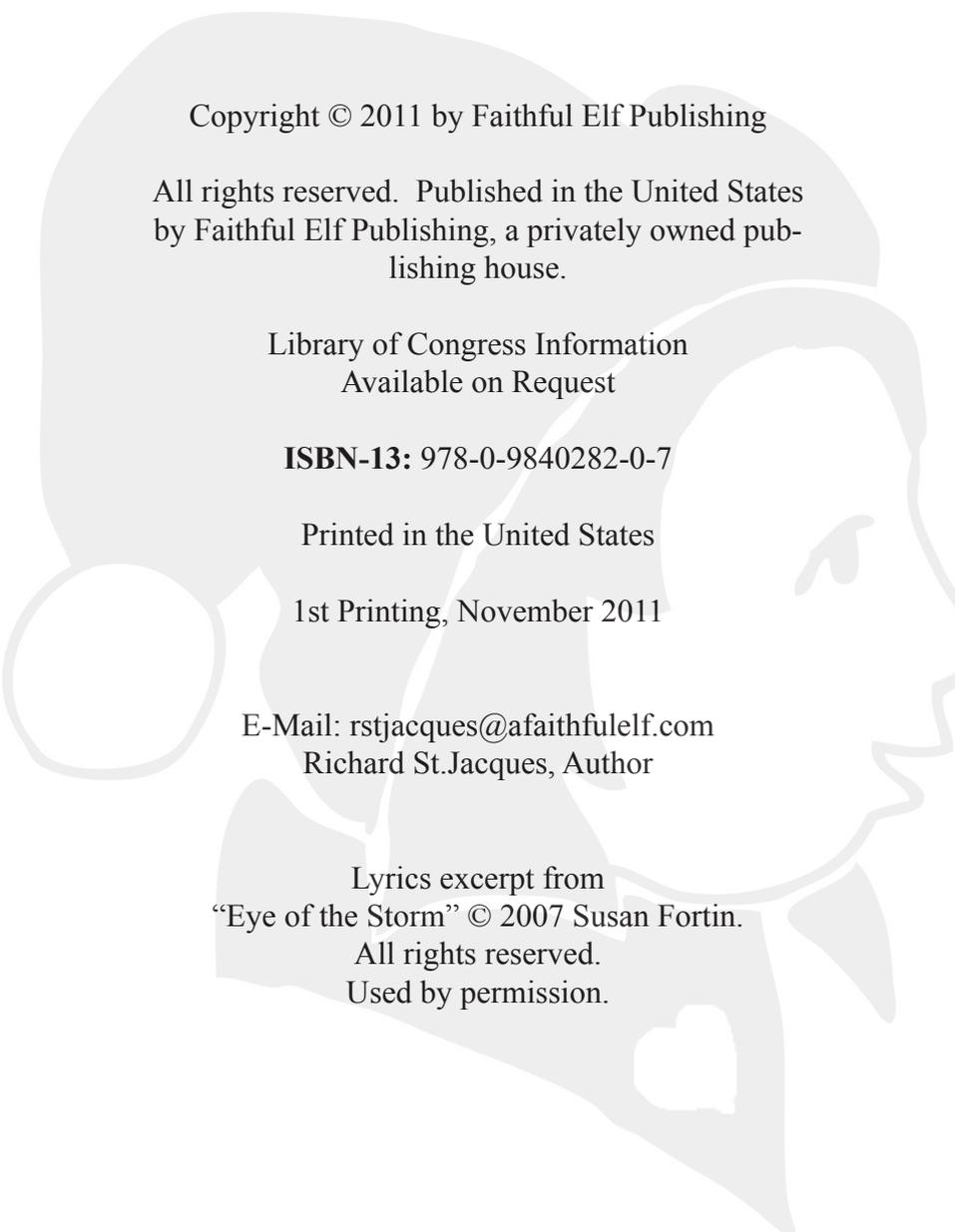
A Faithful Elf



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by Richard St.Jacques

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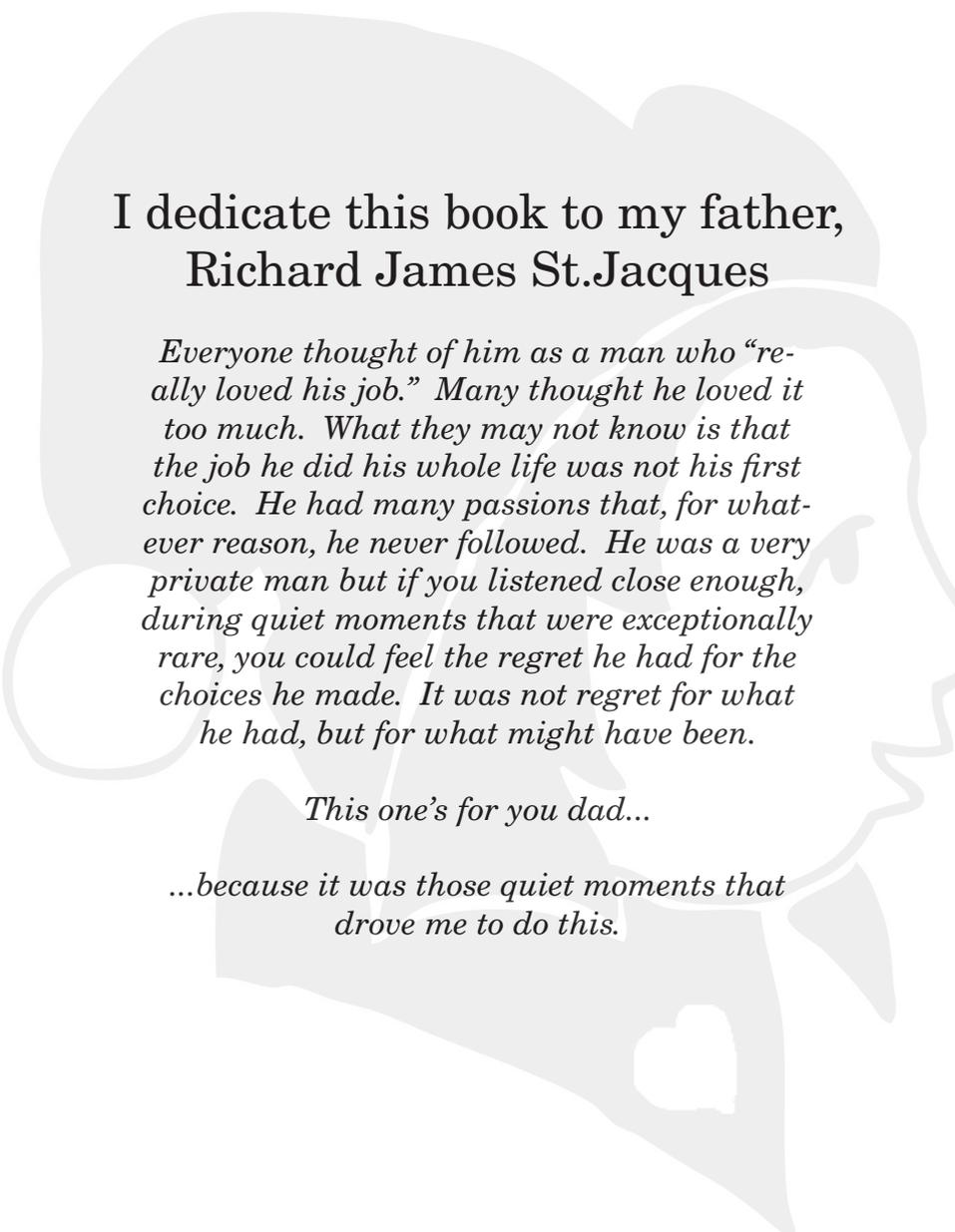
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Lyrics excerpt from
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I dedicate this book to my father,
Richard James St.Jacques

Everyone thought of him as a man who “really loved his job.” Many thought he loved it too much. What they may not know is that the job he did his whole life was not his first choice. He had many passions that, for whatever reason, he never followed. He was a very private man but if you listened close enough, during quiet moments that were exceptionally rare, you could feel the regret he had for the choices he made. It was not regret for what he had, but for what might have been.

This one’s for you dad...

*...because it was those quiet moments that
drove me to do this.*

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“Sangefin”

Derived from the Nordic word ‘Gefa’ (‘to give’). “Sangefin” [sahn-geff-in] is a term originated by the elves over a hundred years ago to refer to the delivery of toys by Santa on Christmas Eve. From its most humble roots, the concept of giving toys was meant to accompany Christmas, but never to become the reason for Christmas. In order to ensure that arrogance never compromised that one truth, this word was born.



Part One

“The Risk”

In its absence, faith is born by taking a risk. You might take the risk for selfish reasons. Maybe there is an emergency, and action is necessary, so you take the risk without thought. Sometimes, you are just following a friend on a mission. No matter how you begin, when you take a risk to do anything in this world, that is where the seeds of faith are planted. That's why it is so often called “A Leap of Faith.”

PART ONE



Chapter One

If someone asked if you believed in Santa Claus, what would you say? And would you know how important your answer would be?

Faith is a funny thing. It can be your constant strength or it can be so fleeting that it is gone in a moment. Sometimes, it exists only when sustained by others. I will tell you, however, that the strongest and rarest faith of all is that which runs deep in your own heart and exists without question. That is the faith that makes the world turn. That is the faith that joins people together. That is the faith... that makes miracles happen.

So I ask you “do you believe in Santa Claus?”

Tommy O'Brien sat staring out the school bus window as the bus slowly made its way home from school. The wind whipped the air freely as the leaves were completely stripped off of the trees. It was only Wednesday, but this was the last bus ride of the week before they settled into the Thanksgiving holiday. Today had been just a half day of school. There was no school on Thanksgiving and, along with a Friday vacation day, they would not have to be back in the old 'schoolhouse jail' until Monday. It wasn't actually that long a break, but when you're a twelve year old boy, to miss a couple days of school, plus

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a weekend thrown in for pleasure, is an awesome thing.

Tommy gazed out the window through the thick brown hair that hung over his dark eyes. Deep in thought, he was daydreaming of the long weekend. He had a new video game that he was just dying to beat. He would try to hide in his room, out of his father's watchful eye. His dad, who always complained that Tommy needed more exercise, would be trying to get him off the computer and out into the snow. He didn't like playing sports, it was not really his thing and he had noticed in the mirror that he was becoming a little 'softer' in the belly. His mom said that it was just his body getting ready for the growth spurt that was long overdue. Either way, playing video games inside or playing outside in the snow, a long weekend easily beat even the best day of school.

The bus was unusually noisy. It was like a bunch of caged animals knowing they were about to be set free. Especially loud, even more than his usual, was the school bully, Dustin Knowles. He was thirteen years old, in seventh grade, and thought he knew everything about everything. He had three older brothers who kept him informed on all that was cool and all that was not. He was a boy with few friends and was with his trusted, and usually frightening, sidekick Louis. Tommy didn't even know Louis' last name. His parents were probably too scared to give him one...in case they wanted to leave him at the hospital or give him back. Louis was easily the largest boy on the school bus and also was the largest boy in the middle school. As a seventh grader, he was imposing even to the eighth graders. He was the scary half of the particularly mean Dustin Knowles.

The "Two Stooges" were tormenting their usual vic-

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tims, Sarah and Molly. The fourth grade girls were very quiet, and always looked for a seat somewhere far away from the bullies. Because of the holiday commotion, today they were last on the bus and had been forced to take seats up front, directly in the firing line of Dustin and Louis. As usual, there was much picking and teasing. The bullies made fun of everything from the girls' lunchboxes to the clothes they were wearing. Tommy felt very guilty about it, but he was also quietly happy that the bullies had found someone they could entertain themselves with, other than him.

Tommy must have lost track of the bus route while he stared out the window because his comfort was soon disturbed when Sarah and Molly's bus stop came up and they happily (and quickly) danced off the bus. Dustin and Louis immediately began their quest for a new victim. They moved down the center aisle, searching through their prey. When you are professional bullies, 'any random target' will simply not do. You have to find a challenge. You have to find someone willing to try to fight back and struggle. Otherwise, where is the fun? They methodically moved toward the back of the bus where Tommy was looking out the window. He may have been staring out the window, but he had them completely in sight from the corner of his eye.

"Hey look, it's Tommy O'Creepy!" said Dustin. Tommy winced.

Louis chimed in, "Yeah four-eyes, whatcha lookin' at with those binoculars?"

Tommy's sight had become bad enough this year that he needed to get glasses. His mom had picked them out. She thought they were stylish. Maybe they were,

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if you were a girl 30 years ago. They were hideous. He was already on his third pair. His parents thought he was clumsy and irresponsible, but he actually would put them in places where they could get broken just so he didn't have to wear them. It was one thing to be breaking them himself; it would be another to have Louis twist them around his neck in front of the other kids on the bus. Tommy just wanted them to go away. "You guys are real funny...don't you have a house to haunt somewhere else?" he stammered.

"Hey Louis, looks like we got us a comedian here! A real clown!" said Dustin as he inched closer.

Louis leered at him "Yeah four-eyes, we can't haunt houses...don't you know Halloween is over? Who you lookin' for? Santy Claus?"

Tommy was embarrassed. Since he could remember, Santa had been very real to him. Having just turned twelve, he was now clinging to that belief by a thread. Belief in Santa did not seem to be an accepted part of growing up. Still, every Christmas his mom and dad would help him with his letter to the North Pole. He knew all the Christmas stories and watched every TV Special. With cable television in his house, these past couple of years had been awesome. As soon as Thanksgiving was over, they played nothing but Christmas shows 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Santa had never let him down, always managing to make sure he left just the right things under the tree. The cookies were always gone, the carrots (for the reindeer) were always nibbled on, and the milk glass was always bone dry. Then, of course, there was the letter. It was there every year. On Christmas morning, it would be right next to the empty cookie plate. It thanked Tom-

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my for the food, told him how great he had been that year, asked him to be just as good next year, and was always signed with a huge letter “S”. Love, Santa. He didn’t tell a soul, but he kept every one neatly folded in his top dresser drawer, in the back, under his socks.

It was his favorite time of the year.

“Yeah, I bet he’s lookin’ for old Santy! Did you ask him for that new dolly you wanted? The one that pee’s when you hug it?” howled Louis. The other kids started to gather around. The crowd always formed when they thought they might get to watch a good fight.

“I bet he wants a play table and chairs, with a little tea set for all his imaginary friends!” jeered Dustin. Then the other kids started to laugh.

With a mean stare, Louis said, “I bet Mrs. Claus made you a special dress...”

Tommy finally broke down and yelled, “Santa wouldn’t do that to me you jerks and anyway that stuff is not...on...my...list.” Uh-oh. He knew it was all over for him now. His secret was out. These nasty kids made it harder and harder on him every year.

“Your list?” laughed Dustin? “You have a list for Santa? What a dunce you are!” he said incredulously. “Get this! Little Tommy O’Creepy has a list for the fat guy in the dirty red suit!” he taunted. “There IS no Santa Claus. I can’t believe I even have to tell you that, you big baby.”

Louis joined in, “and who are you sending this list to? The gnomes at the North Pole? What do you think your parents help you with the list for?”

Dustin sneered, “It’s a game they play with you, you dope. There’s no such thing as Santa Claus. It’s just to

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make the parents have a little fun with the babies...which is why you enjoy it so much I guess!”

The rest of the middle school kids on the bus had crowded in and were having a big laugh at his expense. Thankfully, the real young ones were at the front of the bus and out of earshot. They didn't need their Christmas ruined too.

Tommy could feel the embarrassment as his blood ran to his cheeks. He felt like he wanted to cry but knew that if that happened, his parents would be driving him back and forth to school for the next three years in some other county. Suddenly, he looked up and saw his street corner through the bus window. He thought some kind of miracle must have happened for him. Thank you. Thank you. A thousand times, thank you. He pushed past the two future candidates for the 'delinquent of the year' award and hopped off the bus.

His house wasn't that far from the bus stop, just a block or so. He ran fast down the icy sidewalk, needing to feel the safety of his own bedroom. As he burst through the back door of his house and ran through the kitchen, his mother was at the counter by the sink, cutting fresh green beans for dinner. Rushing by her, he heard her say, "How was school? How about getting the homework done so we can watch some early TV after dinner?"

In her happiest holiday tone, she continued, "it won't be as good as your favorite Christmas specials, but I think some funny game show is on! If you want, we can keep working on that Christmas list! Tommy?"

He slammed the door of his room behind him. What a day. Thankfully he did not have to face any of those kids until Monday. With all of the Thanksgiving

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holiday days off, maybe they would forget everything that happened today. Maybe they would get amnesia from all the chemicals in the turkey...the ones that supposedly made the adults sleepy. "What am I thinking?" he said to himself. "Santa can't be real. If you really think about it, none of it makes sense. The endless toys all delivered on one night, the red suit, the chimney thing...and what is up with all those elves?" It was unbelievable.

He thought about the year he wanted the special bank in the shape of his favorite videogame character. Santa got it for him. He remembered the year he got up Christmas morning and the stuffed dog with the website to log into was NOT there. But in Santa's letter on Christmas morning, he had said that so many kids had asked for it that the elves had to work overtime. Santa said he would get it there. It was under the tree the next morning with a second note saying he was sorry he was late and he hoped Tommy was real happy. Tommy had been ecstatic. None of his friends got that stuffed dog that year; it was a collector's edition.

He desperately held on. All this crazy Santa stuff. How could it actually be real? The other kids were wearing him down. He slowly reached for a wrinkled envelope under his pillow. That was where he kept his unfinished Christmas letter to Santa. He pulled it out and looked at it. There was nothing really special on the list this year, just a couple of video games and a bigger bicycle helmet. He hadn't come up with anything he really wanted...yet.

He stared at the letter. Dustin's laughing face haunted him. He thought of the bicycle he got two years ago and how his dad showed him how to ride it. He imagined Louis glaring at him. He could remember clearly the

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teddy bear he got on what must have been his first real Christmas, the first one he could recall. It was the same teddy bear he had to this day. The one that took all the scariness out of the dark nights. He thought of all the other kids. All laughing and pointing. All thinking he was a baby. He felt something welling up in his eyes. As he quietly sniffed back his runny nose, a tear rolled down his cheek...and he tore the letter in two.



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Whoop! Whoop! Whoop! Whoop!

The sound was deafening. It seemed to be magnified as it echoed around the massive stone castle walls. Little people in forest green clothes scattered about, running frantically. They ran in no particular direction, slipping and sliding on the marble floors as if they had no clue where they were supposed to go. In fact, they didn't.

Amidst the noise and confusion, Agatha walked out of her office. Plainly written on her door was "Chief of Labor Relations." She was not a small elf like the rest of them. She tended to the big size. Not fat, just very stout and sturdy. Her disposition was perfect for her job as chief in charge of all the elf workers, as an unattended elf could be easily sidetracked. No one called her Agatha. To all the elves, she was known as "Aggie." If you called her Agatha, you took your personal safety in your own hands.

"Where's everyone going?" she shouted.

"It's the fire alarm!" shrieked one of the elves as he flew by Aggie.

"We don't HAVE a fire alarm!" yelled Aggie.

"It's the burglar alarm!" cried another elf, running by Aggie in the opposite direction.

"We don't HAVE a burglar alarm!" countered Aggie.

"It's the 'people breaking in to kidnap us' alarm!!"

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shouted another elf.

“We don’t have ANY alarms at the North Pole!” she bellowed. Besides, she thought, who would want to kidnap an elf? They were like monkeys on some kind of crazy sugar rush. If you kidnapped one, good luck, patience had better be one of your best virtues.

It was pure bedlam. The elves flew around like bees leaving a hive that had just been kicked. The whole scene was strange and new to Aggie. She had been at the North Pole for what seemed like forever. She was there long before Santa had arrived. If Aggie hadn’t organized the elves into a toy making unit of perfection, there would never have even been such a thing as Christmas. She was Santa’s lead elf...or at least one of them.

A directionless elf ran wildly through the pack and slammed into Aggie, knocking her down. That was not an easy feat. She had finally had enough. From the middle of the pack of fleeing elves, she grabbed a tiny one by the back of the shirt collar. “You...uh...darn...uh...little green jacketed person! How did the alarm go off? What happened right before that...what was going on?” As she questioned the elf that she held in the air, a random elf ran by and thought “Some Chief of Labor Relations she is. She doesn’t even know our names.”

Hanging by Aggie’s hand, the tiny elf’s legs kept moving, with his toes barely scraping the floor. He quickly squeaked out “I was on break, by the cookie room, and the alarm went off..I almost choked on my hot chocolate you know! Anyway, this weird looking old elf ran by and said ‘it’s the last letter!’ He came from the back hall of the castle.” The nervous elf’s voice got faster and faster, “I wanted to go look, but I never go down that hallway, it’s

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always so dark and depressing. I don't know what's down that hallway, but it can't be a good thing. So I ran away and here I am, and that's all I know...and can I go now? I have to go...somewhere...I don't know...I HAVE TO GO!" With that, the elf wriggled free, made his escape and disappeared into the frantic crowd of elves.

"The last letter," thought Aggie. It can't be. She remembered back to the early years. Santa wanted some rules. He was always worried that the whole 'toys at Christmas' thing could get out of hand. "There must be rules," he had said. Something must be dreadfully wrong here, she thought nervously. Santa's two rules had been pretty stiff, but they only agreed to them because they never thought they would be broken. It was just not something they ever imagined.

Aggie started walking toward the back of the castle. Slowly at first and then quicker, more deliberate. Speeding up her pace, she had to run an obstacle course of little green people. The castle was massive, with tall ceilings and stone fireplaces for heat. It was filled with many workrooms that were connected by a maze of hallways. There were factory rooms, coffee rooms, map rooms and administration rooms. She had to fight her way down long corridors, through the throngs of elves, to get where she was going. The alarm continued to whoop loudly, giving her a massive headache. The closer she got to the back of the castle, the louder it got. Her pace was now a jog as she began to have a sense for what might be going on, and that stuck in the back of her mind. This couldn't really be happening.

Aggie was almost at the back corridor. She turned the corner and slammed into a little elf, knocking him on

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his face. As she picked him up from the back, she recognized the blond hair sticking out from under the green cap. He turned around and looked at her with his blue eyes and bright smile. It was Little Nick. He was not called Little Nick because he was small, although that would have been accurate. He was referred to as Little Nick so everyone wouldn't confuse him with Big Nick, a.k.a. Santa.

Little Nick was loved by all the elves. He had an optimism that was infectious. He always saw the positive side of any situation and assumed that everyone operated with the best intentions. Unlike the other elves, he was very calming, an almost soothing presence. Also, unlike the other elves, he had normal round ears and not the pointed ones shared by all elves. Aggie, while thinking he was incredibly naive, had a fond spot in her heart for him. It was hard not to.

"Where are you going!" shouted Aggie over the noise.

"Down the back corridor to the alarm!" yelled Nick. "Everyone is panicked, I thought I should try to help!" he said with a grin. "It's just noise, really, how bad can it be?"

"You, my little friend," thought Aggie, "are just what I need to ease the dark thoughts I'm having." She shouted over the noise, "Come with me, and stay behind me so you don't get trampled...again."

With authority in her stride, she made her way down the hallway. It was dimly lit. Candles on the stone walls helped them to find their way but, while helpful, created a creepiness that was unnerving. No wonder the uninformed elves stayed out of here. It had been nearly 100 years since Aggie had been down this pathway (elves

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have a very different lifespan than people). She remembered back to the early days when this wing was built. It had been designed this way intentionally. It was supposed to discourage nosy elves from coming to this part of the castle. It had been built with a deliberate purpose. As Aggie looked at the walls, she couldn't help but smile at the ominous handiwork. Looks like we did an effective job, she pondered.

"Where are we going?" asked Nick.

Aggie looked at the boyish smile. He was a real child at heart, but then again, he should be. Although they all aged slower at the North Pole, Little Nick was closer to the age of an eleven or twelve year old boy. The only thing that revealed how many years he had actually lived was the wise experience one might sometimes find in his comments. His questions were always pure, never motivated by anything else. You could count on that. Cautiously, Aggie said to him, "the Outbound Mail Room."

"The Outbound Mail Room?" he quizzically said. "Never heard of it," he spoke thoughtfully as he scratched his head under his cap. "Everyone has heard about the Inbound Mail Room. I sneak in there every so often just to read all the kids' letters to Santa. They're always so nice and they remind me that Christmas is just around the corner! So what's the Outbound Mail Room?"

"It's a very old place, Nick, and kind of a secret. You're not to tell anyone about this," she said sternly.

The corridor twisted and turned until they came to a large wooden door. It had a single brass handle on it. The door was massive and very heavy. No little window. No doorbell. Not even a door-knocker. If you didn't know what was on the other side, you wouldn't think of going

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in. Again, thought Aggie proudly as she considered the design, we did a good job.

As she leaned into the door and turned the handle, it let out a long loud creak. You could even hear it screech over the ever present “whoop” of the alarm. On the wall, inside the door, was a red button with a sign over it. The sign read, “To Turn Off Alarm, Push Button.” She slammed it with her fist. Well, she thought, “that was easy.” With Little Nick still behind her, she walked in. Slowly examining the empty room, the first thing she noticed was an envelope on the floor. It was a sealed, fancy white envelope with shiny gold print. From the weight, it was definitely not empty and was addressed to Mr. and Mrs. William O’Brien. Aggie felt a lump well up in her throat.

“What’s that?” said Little Nick. “It’s pretty.”

“It’s pretty all right,” said Aggie, barely able to get the words out. She thought to herself, “What else would you expect from a letter sent to you by Santa himself?” She tore open the envelope and took out the letter that had been neatly folded inside.

“Should you be doing that Aggie?” said her small companion. “Isn’t that, like, against the law or something?”

Aggie read the letter out loud. “Dear Mr. and Mrs. O’Brien,” she began. “We are very sorry to inform you that your son, Tommy, has decided that he no longer believes in Santa Claus. We have enjoyed the privilege of making and delivering Tommy’s Christmas wishes these past years. While these moments make us sad, we regret to inform you that the duty of providing Tommy’s Christmas toys will, from now on, be someone else’s responsi-

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bility. Tommy is a fine boy. It has been a delight. Love, Santa.”

“What is that?” said Little Nick in a scared voice that Aggie had never heard from him before.

As Aggie looked around the empty room, there wasn't an elf in sight. No one was working. No one was writing. No one was processing. Every computer had stopped running. The Outbound Mail room was empty and silent. She said with a cracking voice, “I think, Little Nick, that I'm holding the ‘Last Letter.’”

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Aggie sat slumped in a chair at one of the administration desks in the Outbound Mail Room. She silently stared at the parchment she held in her hand. Little Nick looked at Aggie mysteriously. “What do you mean, the ‘last letter’?” he said. Aggie was not sure just how much she should tell him. She had made an oath long ago but now, with this event, it just didn’t seem to matter how many of the old secrets she revealed.

The boy’s innocent face was filled with curiosity. She drew in a deep breath and began her tale, “Back in the days when we first started delivering the toys...”

The castle stood majestically between two rolling snow covered hills. Mountains surrounded it on all four sides, providing ample cover from anyone who came in search of the secrets held within its gray covered stone walls. The sturdy stone castle was flanked on both sides by two giant towers that were the tallest handmade structures at the North Pole. To the west of the massive building were two large outbuildings. One served as a barn and housed the reindeer, while the other served as an extra storage area for the toys that overflowed the castle warehouses. In those days, the toy runs were frequent and there was not such need for extensive toy storage.

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It was a much smaller castle then, but more vibrant. There was an energy that couldn't be contained. Something new was abuzz. The elves were all smiling and working furiously on the toys. Very few breaks were taken in the work day. Each elf was so focused and so full with a sense of purpose that breaks, although offered, weren't even observed. It always seemed to the elves that they would begin their work anxiously with heads down and when they finally looked up, the day would be over.

A group of elves was putting a large countdown clock up on the wall. The small toymakers were struggling with its size and the task of bolting it to the solid stone walls. It said, '22 Days Left Until Christmas Eve.'

When you came in the front door of the castle, the work floor was the first thing you saw. It was a flurry of activity. In the middle of the main work area was a giant stairway that went up four floors. The stairway started wide and then narrowed to a large golden door. It was a strange door because it had been cut in half across the middle. Santa had wanted it this way so he could keep the top half open and look down over the entire work floor. He loved watching the elves working on their various projects with smiles dancing on their faces and the show of pride in their craft.

On this day, Santa sat on a big chair of solid dark mahogany with deep red cushions. Across from him, in smaller chairs of similar luxury, sat his right hand 'men'. On one chair sat a much younger (and slightly less stout) Aggie. Her face carried a dignity and sense of purpose that reflected someone about to embark on a great journey. Next to Aggie, in a similar chair, sat her nemesis Priscilla. Priscilla was taller and leaner than Aggie, considered by

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most elves to be the brightest at the North Pole. She wore glasses, which added to her air of intelligence. Aggie was not even sure she needed them. "She probably wears them for effect," she had remarked nastily. Priscilla was very cunning and could devise a solution for just about any problem. While Aggie tended to take the shortest (and sometimes, the most painful) approach to solving problems, Priscilla gave things the thought they merited and always seemed to choose the best suited path. Priscilla was a leader that people voluntarily followed, while Aggie was the type of leader you followed, or else. They were roughly the same age in elf years, give or take 5 to 10 years, and had been competitors since they were children. That was what made Priscilla Aggie's nemesis.

"Thank you for coming up here today," said Santa in an official but truly appreciative tone. His comment seemed funny to both elves because 'not coming' when asked by Santa was not something they would have even considered. "I have called you both here to tell you personally, before telling the other elves, that I am putting each of you in my top leadership positions here at the North Pole. As you know, we are embarking on a new mission here this Christmas. When we were making toys for small towns and villages and making many trips each year, we could get away with our 'freewheeling' style of production. As you know, this year, word of our toy making and delivery has spread throughout the world. The number of children asking for toys has grown like an explosion and we are now under considerable pressure to deliver. We are going to turn toy delivery into a one night event and deliver the entire world between sunset, North Pole time, and sunrise. It is going to be a concentrated effort, all done in one big

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delivery.”

“Seriously...one night only?” said Priscilla with a raised and skeptical eye brow.

“I think it’s a great idea,” said Aggie with a slightly evil grin. She was always game to one-up Priscilla.

While entertained a bit by their dueling, Santa responded “Yes, one night. And to do that, we need to be more focused than ever on our production and our delivery. Therefore, I will be putting you, Agatha (a name to which Aggie cringed) in charge of Labor Relations. You will deal with all the elves and with their toy production operations. They know how to make the toys, but it will be your job to ensure they stay focused and fill all inventory orders in accordance with Inventory Control.”

“With all due respect sir,” said Priscilla curtly, “don’t you think that you might want someone (‘ahem’, she cleared her throat) a bit more, shall we say, diplomatic?”

Aggie was incredulous and glared at Priscilla. “Are you saying I can’t keep those crazy little toymakers in line? Are you? Because all they need is a good kick in the green pants every now and then and they’ll do what they’re supposed to do.”

“My point,” said Priscilla, looking at Santa.

Santa tried his best not to let them distract him.

“As I look to the future, Priscilla, I can see a time when the demand for toys and the number of elves to make them may require a skill beyond diplomacy. Please know that I have given this some thought. I am charging you, Priscilla, with being my Chief of Inventory Control. Your job will be to ensure that the orders that come in are properly accounted for and that all toy orders are filled accurately. Your responsibility is to make sure that we always get ev-

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ery child's wish right."

"That's right Prissy! You get the job of 'proper dolly count!'" jeered Aggie.

"DON'T call me Prissy," said Priscilla with an anger that almost never surfaced from her ever calculating demeanor. "Santa, I want to help you here, I really do. Looking to the future, the number of toys that I'm going to be accountable for will be..."

"What's wrong Prissy? Big numbers going to cause you brain-strain? No wonder you would rather be the Elf Boss."

"I'm warning you Agatha," Priscilla hissed.

"Okay, okay," said Santa, "I understand your concern." The two girl elves looked at him curiously.

"We are going to call this one night 'Sangefin'. It is extremely important that our toy making never become misunderstood for the meaning of Christmas itself," Santa said somberly.

"Lastly, I have decided that we need a couple of rules for this annual one night delivery effort."

He said pensively, "We are going to bring toys only to those children who remain faithful to their belief in our cause. We're not going to be bringing toys to children who are not of faith. The first of my two rules will be, 'When a child stops believing in Santa Claus, we will send a letter to the parents and we will no longer deliver toys for the child...other arrangements may be made. Perhaps the parents will need to do it.'"

"Make the toys?" said Priscilla. "They will have to actually make toys...each parent?"

"Make, purchase, maybe sometimes even discourage the request. We have a lot of toys to make and deliver...we

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need to set some limits.”

“Tough but fair,” remarked Aggie. “Great rule. I second it.”

“This isn’t a democracy Aggie,” said Santa, becoming slightly agitated by the lack of teamwork being demonstrated. “We already have an established Inbound Mail Room for the toy requests from the children. We will establish, in a back corner of the castle, an Outbound Mail Room. It is from this room that the letters to parents will be produced and sent. The room is to be kept a secret from the other elves. They should stay happily focused on filling the orders of the faithful. Managing the ‘lack of faith’ can be a nasty business, but it is a necessity. No need to broadcast it to the other elves.”

He said with finality, “there will be one other rule. I have given this much thought. Every endeavor has a beginning and an end. To not plan for that, would be irresponsible. We have a great vision here, but we can’t possibly know what the future holds for us. For that reason, I have decided on rule number two. Rule two is, ‘If the day ever comes when the number of Outbound Mail Room letters sent to parents exceeds the Inbound Mail Room toy request letters received, then this night of Sangefin will be finished.’”

“Finished?” said Priscilla.

“Yeah Santa,” said Aggie, “I’m a little unclear on the whole ‘finished’ thing...can you elaborate a little more?”

“Finished. Finished as in, no more toy delivery. Forever more. Ever. Is that clear enough?”

“Hey, look, don’t misunderstand me here, I’m as tough as the next...uh....tough elf. But making toys and delivering toys is really what we do here...it’s who we are.

A FAITHFUL ELF

If that happens, what will we elves do?" asked Aggie.

Priscilla eyed Santa studiously for his response and he wisely said "we will figure that out when the time comes but for now, we will enjoy our job! Now go and get started organizing the elves. There's 22 days until our first Christmas Eve and we still have a lot of work in front of us. It is a truly joyous time!" Santa said with a grin.

It really was a time to dwell on the joy they were about to bring the world. Rule number two quickly dissolved in their minds as they got up to leave Santa's office.

"Make sure you send me the most up to date inventory requests there little Prissy!" yapped Aggie.

"You never learn, do you Aggie? Maybe, someday, you will," said Priscilla with a calculating look on her face. Aggie and Priscilla walked out the door together and descended the great staircase to their new mission.

..."I really never thought it would come to this," Aggie said sadly.

"I understand the story of the rules Aggie," said Little Nick. "But what does that mean about what's happened here today?"

Aggie looked up over her left shoulder to a screen on the wall. In all the excitement and noise, Little Nick hadn't even noticed it. It simply said 'OMC', and under the letters, like a scoreboard, it said '+1.'

"I still don't get it," Nick said. He was trying hard to understand.

"I know it's a bit mysterious Nick," Aggie explained in an unusually patient tone. "OMC stands for Outbound Mail Count. Folks often use abbreviations when the real words are too painful for them to actually say. To keep

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careful track of Santa's Rule Number Two, the OMC number should always be watched closely...it should always be negative. The day the Outbound Mail Count becomes positive, the letters going out are more than the letters coming in and...that's it," she said strangely.

"It?"

"It," she said. "Finito. No more Sangefin Christmas toy delivery."

"What are we going to do?" said a nervous Little Nick.

"Go get Pixie and bring her to my office. We'll need some extra brains to work this one out," Aggie stated firmly.

"Okay," replied Little Nick. "Hey Aggie? How come you call Priscilla 'Pixie' and not 'Prissy' like in the story?"

Aggie smirked. "First, you know better than to call her Priscilla. Second, a couple days after Santa promoted us, I almost gagged on my hot chocolate. Someone put coffee grounds in it...very strong coffee grounds. I was awake for the next 4 days. She always innocently said it was an accident but I never bought that excuse. Let's just say that one should never cross old Pixie. No one wants to find out the limit of her conniving mind."

Nick ran from the Outbound Mail Room to find Pixie. As ominous as the current situation was, the thought of Aggie whizzing around madly on a colossal coffee-rush was enough to make him giggle.