

CHRISTMAS NIGHT OF THE WALKING EVIL LIVING DEAD

A ZOMBIE MANIA

IGGY, YUGO AND SAM ADVENTURES

A Christmas Caroline

A Christmas Time Tale

Everyone Needs A Little Space at Christmas

A Christmas Mystery

Raiders of the Lost Christmas Cavern

The Last of the Snow Wolves

The Return of Leviticus Swyne

A Fairy Merry Christmas Tale

What's Past is Present

A Feast of Fools

Lucretia Alopeesha Takes a Vacation

Elves in Toyland

CD25: Christmas Day

The Treasure of the Claus

The Man in Sandy Clothes

Maggot, Lice and Worm

A Winter of Discontent

Ghosts of Christmas Future

Nightmare On Elf Street

The Fright Before Christmas

North Pole Stud

Here There Be Monsters

A Tale of Two Kidneys

What Are You Waiting For ... Christmas?

Freaky Christmasday

ELFolution

South to Alaska

Boys Will Be Boys

Murder at the North Pole

Christmas Night of the Walking Evil Living Dead

In which Iggy sneezes,
Yugo opens the window, and
Sam swings a shovel like a boss.

And in which the stuffing gets real

This story is rated:



Let's not fool ourselves about these stories.

Sometimes they get a bit rough and sometimes they are downright rude.

You should have known what you were getting into when you
picked up a story with the title:

CHRISTMAS NIGHT OF THE WALKING EVIL LIVING DEAD

If the title did not make it clear, this story involves (SPOILER WARNING)

a zombie uprising at the North Pole a week before Christmas.

That ought to have been apparent from the title of this story, which
refers to walking, evil AND living dead.

If it was not already apparent, this story is bursting with an undead
menace, almost all of whom are elves.

If that is not enough to make you stop reading now, this story also has:

- Several extended sequences of zombie related terror,
- A good measure of shovel related violence,
- Some biting,
- The consumption of 3 pints of egg nog and 2 pints of Elflägër,
- A great many private parts are kicked, often fiercely, and
- Numerous Christmas themed euphemisms for elven genitalia

If you've got the stomach for all of that, then by all means, carry on

HERE'S HOPING
YOUR HOLIDAYS . . .



AREN'T FILLED WITH RAVENOUS,
MURDEROUS CREATURES



“They came for the stockings and there wasn’t anywhere to hide,
Well I told I wanna help my last Noel
We better kick those zombies back to Hell
If you wanna live to tell, *Zombie Christmas*”

- Emmy the Great and Tim Wheeler, *Zombie Christmas*

“I don’t know if I’m ready, I don’t know if I’m strong,
But if Christmas needs saving, then we must be moving,
Must be moving, must be moving on”

- Ryan McAllister, *My Name is Blitzen*

“I don’t want to speak too soon,
but I think we might have just saved Christmas”

-Jonathon Coulton, *Podsafe Christmas Song*

About halfway through the last Iggy, Yugo and Sam adventure, *Murder at the North Pole*, there is a footnote that says:

⁵ The Advanced Tool Department (ADT) is just one of the many divisions of the North Pole Research and Development Branch (NPRDB). Among many others, there is the Particle Accelerator Team (PET), the Cold Fusion Investigation Unit (CFUI) and the Extremely Contagious and Dangerous Diseases Center (ECDDC). More about them later.

This story is the more about them later

A Tale of 'Citement and 'Ventures

CHRISTMAS NIGHT OF THE WALKING EVIL LIVING DEAD

THE INESCAPABLE LAWS

IT IS SAID THAT THE NORTH POLE IS A LAND OF LAWS AND NOT ELVES. Even though no one has ever said that until that last sentence was written just now, it is a truism nonetheless. No elf is above the law.

There are a great many laws that elves are therefore beneath. There are all of the laws against stealing and unspeakable grievous violence. Elves are beneath those laws.

But there are other laws that rank ahead of elves in the hierarchy of laws and elves. The law of gravity is one example. There are reindeer scampering about the North Pole which flaunt this law with regularity, but no elf ever can. Then there is the law of unintended consequences, which deems that the solution to one problem will only result in a host of bigger and more intractable problems.

Like every other place, the North Pole is also governed by the law of supply and demand. If there is a demand for some item, the corresponding supply of that item will likewise increase. Eventually the demand for that item will pass and there will be such an overabundance of it that it cannot even be given away.

This is a story about what happens when certain uppity elves try and get themselves up above the law. It is a story of unintended consequences. And sneezes.

Unfortunately, it is also a story of unspeakable and grievous violence. Christmas is not always about ho ho ho and jingle bells. Sometimes at Christmas, you feel the warmth of the human spirit all around you. Other times, you have to run for your life. This is one of those times.

THE OVERABUNDANT DOLLS

IT IS ALSO SAID THAT LAST CHRISTMAS I GAVE YOU MY HEART, but the very next day you gave it away. However, it is more likely that last Christmas I gave you a Little Miss Henrietta™ doll. It was the hit toy of the year. There were lineups outside the mall and desperate moms and dads fought tooth and nail to get them. This is no exaggeration; many a tooth and nail were left scattered in the aisles of toy stores following pitched battles for the Little Miss Henrietta™ doll.

The excitement over the Little Miss Henrietta™ doll is difficult to explain. Henrietta Porkins was a chubby 5 year old beauty queen who won a roomful of trophies bigger than she was in a string of beauty pageants over a period of 6 months. She became so famous in the Under 6 beauty pageant circuit that it was only a matter of time before she became the star of a popular reality television program. All of the merchandise that followed was a huge hit. There were Momma Porkins dolls and Grampa Weezer Porkins dolls and Snuffly the pet armadillo dolls. But the most popular and most demanded doll of all was the Little Miss Henrietta™ doll.

Everyone had to have one and toy stores could not keep them in stock. Factories everywhere went into overtime to meet the demand. But by spring, Henrietta had turned six, lost three teeth and gained another 30 pounds. Her days as a preschool beauty queen were over. Her television program was cancelled and nobody had any use for a Little Miss Henrietta™ doll anymore.

This made for something of a dilemma for the elves at the North Pole. They had expected that the Little Miss Henrietta™ doll would be even more popular the next Christmas than it had been the Christmas before. In an effort to spare the teeth and nails of parents everywhere, they made millions of Little Miss Henrietta™ dolls. The North Pole warehouses were stacked to the rafters with crates of Little Miss Henrietta™ dolls.

The supply had more than met the demand. The problem was that nobody wanted a Little Miss Henrietta™ doll anymore. They could not even be given away, which is a real problem for the North Pole, which is in the business of giving away toys.

The hottest toy this Christmas was the Zombie Maniac™ doll. **Zombie Mania** was the biggest hit musical in years. The big duet that the two zombies sing at the end of the first act (“I Want To Hold Your Hand, And Then Eat It”) had been downloaded over ten million times. Even weeks before Christmas, the Zombie Maniac™ doll, with super brain eating action, had resulted in lost teeth and nails all over the world.

The orders for the Zombie Maniac™ poured into the North Pole. Even working overtime, the elves were hopelessly behind. With only a week left before the big

day, it was obvious that millions of children would go without super brain eating action on Christmas morning.

THE UNCOOL SCIENTISTS

IT IS FINALLY SAID THAT ELVES ARE A CREATIVE AND STUDIOUS LOT. None of them wanted the Christmas tragedy that was about to unfold. Urgent memos were sent to every corner of the North Pole pleading for help. Even more urgent memos were sent to the North Pole Research and Development Branch (NPRDB) looking to their crack team of elfish research and developers for a solution.

It is said that elves are the biggest nerds in the world¹ and this is so. Even though they live at the North Pole, where the average temperature is always below freezing, elves are not cool. The nerdiest of them are assigned to the NPRDB.

The NPRDB is housed in a squat building on the south side² of the North Pole. Only the nerdiest of elves are assigned to the NPRDB. Within the narrow halls of the NPRDB there are more slide rules and red and green pocket protectors than you could imagine.

The nerdy geniuses (genii?) of the NPRDB threw themselves into the task of making more *Zombie Maniacs*[™] than were elfishly possible. More memos and meetings followed and each division of the NPRDB raced the other to find the answer. The Cold Fusion Investigation Unit (CFIU) assembled new and bigger reactors. They found a clean and limitless new energy source, but that was no help to anyone. The Complicated Math Division (CMD) built even bigger blackboards to hold all of their calculations and derivations. They worked out most of the meaning of the universe, but no one cared.

It was the unlikely group at the Extremely Contagious and Dangerous Diseases Center (ECDDC) that found the answer. That unlikely group comprised the three nerdiest elves in the entire NPRDB. You do not get to work with the most virulent pathogens unless you are a nerd's nerd. The sort of nerd that other nerds slap a post it note on their backs that says "kick me". The kind of nerds who would have sand kicked in their face at the beach, if there were any beaches or sand to be kicked within 5000 miles of the North Pole.

¹ Again, this is something that has been said for the first time right here. A google search of the phrase "elves are the biggest nerds in the world" returns exactly zero results.

² Every direction from the North Pole is south, so every building at the North Pole is necessarily on the south side. Ironically, there is no north side at the North Pole.

There were three elves who ran the ECDCC. These three were nerds among nerds. They were nerds who were spared having sand kicked into their eyes only by geographical circumstance. They worked in the third sub-basement of the NPRDB. If they had any friends, which they did not, their friends would have called them Winker, Blinker and Nedd³.

The things these three elves could do with *e coli* would make your head spin. And then you would have to rush to the toilet, spinning head and all, where you would be ghastly ill.

Winker was a redheaded elf who wore an eyepatch, a permanent reminder that one should always wear safety goggles when working in the lab. He considered *e coli* to be a pedestrian little germ. He worked primarily with *f coli*, which was way worse. A whiff of *f coli* is enough to make your eyes bleed and your hair turn orange.

Blinker was once a red headed elf as well, but the only red hair that he had left were a pair of tangled tufts above each of his pointed ears. The rest of his head was entirely bald and so shiny it was rumored that he waxed it each morning with special scalp wax.⁴ He wore rimless yellow sunglasses, even when he was indoors. Blinker was an expert with *g coli* which is even more awful stuff than *f coli*. If you were to ever see even a single *g coli* molecule with the naked eye your face might peel off.

These germs have nothing on *h coli*, sometimes known by its full name, the *horrible coli*. That stuff is just impossible. No one really knows what it does, except for Nedd. Nedd was a skinny elf with straight brown hair that hung in his eyes. He was a genius with germs and was the only elf who ever dared to work with the dreaded *h coli*. Of all the nerdy elves at the ECDCC, only Nedd had a notion of what might happen to someone who was exposed to *h coli*, and it was far worse than bleeding eyes, orange hair and a peeled off face.

³ These names are lifted from a poem by Eugene Field called *Wynken Blynken and Nod*, which my Mom used to read to me at bedtime and that I sometimes read to my own kids. It is a really nice poem. Please consider the names used here to be an homage. It's not stealing or plagiarizing if it is an homage.

⁴ The rumours are true.

THE HORRIBLE COLI

WITH ALL OF THAT EXPOSITION AND BACK STORY BEHIND HIM, Nedd burst through the door of Winker's laboratory in the south wing⁵ of the ECDDC building one week before Christmas. "Eureka!" he shouted.

Winker looked up from his beakers. Something green bubbled ominously up to the rim. "What have you discovered now?" Winker understood that "eureka" is what scientists always shout after some big discovery. They think it makes them sound cool. It does not. No one has ever shouted the word "eureka!" and looked cool about it. Scientists just do not understand these things.

"The dolls, Winker. I've solved the problem with the dolls," said Nedd.

Winker's good eye widened. He reached over and pounded on the wall. "Blinker, get in here!" he yelled.

There was some muffled muttering from the other side of the wall, followed by the muffled sound of someone closing a textbook, climbing down from a stool and shuffling across a laboratory. There were muffled steps in the hall and then a third elf squeezed through the door beside Nedd. "This had better be good," he said. "I'm working on a very difficult equation. Many coefficients."

Nedd reached into his neatly pressed lab coat and pulled out a wriggling green object. He held it up to the others. "Look at this."

Blinker looked over his yellow sunglasses. "A Zombie Maniac™ doll?"

"Those are impossible to find. Where did you get it?" asked Winker.

"I made it," said Nedd.

Blinker sniffed. "We don't make toys, here. That's a job for worker elves."

The Zombie Maniac™ doll glared at Blinker and growled. "Braiiiiins."

Winker was more impressed. "Wow that is some good super brain eating action."

Blinker took the doll from Nedd's hand. It snapped at him with impressively sharp teeth. "Nasty thing," he said. "How did you do it?"

Nedd grinned. "I've been running some new trials with *h*." Nedd liked to call the *horrible coli* simply "*h*" to flaunt his unique familiarity with the pathogen.

Winker gasped. "Not the *horrible coli*?"

⁵ We've pretty much done this every direction at the North Pole is south thing to death, haven't we? I cannot conceive of a fresh take on this gag, so there will be no more of that. It is just bogging things down at this point.

“The very same,” said Nedd.

“Didn’t Santa Claus himself tell you to stop your experiments with *h coli*?”

“Not exactly,” said Ned. “Santa Claus told me to stop experimenting on animals. I can’t do any more trials on puffins or Arctic monkeys⁶ anymore. So I ran some experiments on some of those Little Miss Henrietta™ dolls.”

Blinker nodded. “We certainly have those in abundance,” he said.

Winker agreed. “It’s the law of supply and demand.”

“I collected a few of the Little Miss Henrietta™ dolls from storage. Then I exposed the whole lot to different doses of *h*. This is the result.” Nedd gestured at the growling, feral Zombie Maniac™ doll in Blinker’s hand. It snapped at the air hungrily.

“Are you saying that the *horrible coli* can turn a sweet Little Miss Henrietta™ doll into a maniacal zombie?”

“Indubitably,” said Nedd. This is another thing scientists say that keeps them from being cool.

Blinker turned the green skinned doll over in his hands. “I’m skeptical that any germ, even a germ as horrible as the *horrible coli*, could do this to a doll.”

Winker scowled. “Yes, a demonstration of your method is clearly in order. Can you replicate this effect?”

Nedd nodded rapidly. “Of course.” Scientists live for demonstrations that replicate effects. It is their method.

He turned out of the room and led the other two scientists, along with the gnashing and thrashing Zombie Maniac™ doll into the laboratory next door. It was a small lab, cramped with test tubes and Bunsen burners.⁷ Arcs of electricity danced up wires that ran from a large table in the middle of the room to the ceiling.

Nedd reached into a closet and pulled out three red and green velvet hazmat uniforms. He passed one to each of Winker and Blinker. “You had better put these on. And Winker, don’t forget to wear your safety goggles.”

Winker glared at Nedd with his good eye. Then he lifted his safety goggles into place.

⁶ Sadly, there are no monkeys at the North Pole. The only Arctic Monkeys there are is the really good British alternative rock band of that name. No experiments were performed on any band members in the writing of this story.

⁷ The Bunsen burner was invented by Robert Bunsen in 1854 and is used in laboratories throughout the world to safely heat many chemicals which should never be exposed to heat in the slightest.

Nedd pulled down the red velvet hood of his hazmat suit. It had a pointy top with a little jingle bell on it. He retrieved a Little Miss Henrietta™ doll from box at the end of the table and set it down on the counter.

“Those dolls are really cute,” said Blinker.

“Just wait,” said Nedd. He lifted a cooler onto the table and opened the lid. Frosted steam curled out from the opening. Winker thought it formed the shape of a skull for a just a moment before it dissipated. Nedd reached into the cooler with a pair of laboratory tongs and pulled out a small test tube. He carefully removed the stopper with his gloved hand. He poured the smallest drop of the green liquid inside onto a cloth and then secured and locked the test tube back into the cooler.

Little Miss Henrietta’s™ eyes grew wide as he placed the cloth over her tiny nose and dimpled mouth. She shook her head and then lay still. Nedd withdrew the cloth.

“I don’t see anything,” said Winker.

“Just wait a moment,” said Nedd.

A moment passed and then the little doll began shaking. It coughed twice and then rolled over onto its side. Her pink face slowly changed to the colour of a bruise. The dimple at the side of her mouth became an angry looking sore. The doll stood shakily and limped towards the edge of the table. It raised its arms straight in front of its pageant dress. It stammered out a single word. “B-b-braiiins.”

Little Miss Henrietta™ was no longer a miniature beauty queen. She was drooling, growling brain starved Zombie Maniac™.

“Incredible,” said Winker.

“Nasty, isn’t it?” said Nedd, with a grin. “Every kid wants a Zombie Maniac™ doll this Christmas, but all we have are warehouses full of Little Miss Henrietta™.”

“Nobody wants those,” said Winker.

“Right. But if we infect all of those dolls with the right dose of *h*, we can make all of the Zombie Maniac™ dolls we could ever need.”

“We’ll have Zombie Maniacs™ in abundance,” said Blinker.

“Indubitably,” said Nedd. He crossed his arms and beamed proudly.

Winker shook his head slowly and whistled. “You’ve really done it, Nedd. You’ve saved Christmas.”

THE FURTIVE SCRAMBLERS

IGGY, YUGO AND SAM SAT AT THEIR WORK BENCH assembling Zombie Maniac™ dolls to meet the flood of orders that had reached the North Pole. They were the only elves left in the workshop at this hour, because Sam's frequent snack breaks had left them behind on their quota and had to stay later than the other elves.

Sam regretted his second lunch break now. Not only was he still hard at work building Zombie Maniac™ dolls after everyone else had gone home, he was also 3 hours late for his evening date with Nutmeg. Nutmeg was his occasional girlfriend, a sprightly elf with big brown eyes and a scrapbook she kept about Sam under her bed. Sam did not know about the scrapbook, but he knew there was going to be no end of trouble with Nutmeg about another late shift in the toy factory. She would probably be his occasional ex-girlfriend again after this one.

At the other end of the workbench, Iggy carefully twisted a scowling green head onto a festering green body. "I really don't care for these dolls at all," he said. "They seem so unhappy." Iggy was tall, for an elf, with untidy black hair that pointed in all directions. He passed the partially assembled doll to Yugo.

Yugo was a stocky elf, with bright eyes and a thick dark moustache. He was the handiest elf at the North Pole and expertly slipped a fractured green arm into a blue-green shoulder socket and slapped the misshapen legs into place. "They are pretty ugly," he agreed. "But this is what all of the kids are asking for this Christmas.

He passed the completed doll to Sam, who wrapped a tattered black overcoat around it. He held it up. It leered back at him hungrily. "I know how you feel," he said to the doll. "I'm hungry, too." Sam was a chubby elf, with red curly hair who always seemed to be scowling. He tossed the wheeled doll into a wheeled crate at the end of the workbench. "That's another gross of those gross dolls."

"Time to make another gross," said Iggy. He grabbed a grimacing zombie head from the bin beside him and screwed it into another rotting zombie body. He passed it to Yugo and glanced out the workshop window just as Winker, Blinker and Nedd scrambled furtively past. "Who are those guys and why are they scrambling so furtively?" he asked.

Yugo looked out the window at the three figures furtively scrambling down the dark street. "I can't see who they are. But anyone scrambling that furtively can only be up to mischief." He passed the partially assembled Zombie Maniac™ to Sam.

Sam took the doll and stuffed it into a pair of blood stained overalls with a torn strap. “The only thing I like to see scrambled are eggs. As a matter of fact, I wouldn’t mind some eggs right now. Is it lunch time yet?”

“Sam, we just had lunch an hour ago,” said Iggy.

“That explains why I’m so hungry,” said Sam. He tossed the completed Zombie Maniac™ doll into an empty cart and looked out the window in time to see Winker, Blinker and Nedd scrambling furtively around the corner of the cookie supplies building and out of sight.

Around the corner of the cookie supplies building, just out of Sam’s sight, Winker, Blinker and Nedd paused to catch their breath. “Do you think anyone saw us?” asked Winker.

“I don’t think so. It’s really dark out here,” said Blinker. He coughed a couple of times, wheezed, and said, “I’ve never scrambled so furtively in my life.”

Nedd slipped in beside them. He carried a heavy cylindrical yellow canister with the letter ‘H’ crudely painted on one side under his arm. He slid the back of a mittened hand across his brow to wipe away the sweat, even though the air temperature was something less than 30 degrees below zero. He waved towards the end of the street. “It’s just one block further. That’s the silo where we will find an abundance of Little Miss Henrietta™ dolls. Once we infect them with the *h*, we’ll be heroes.”

Winker nodded enthusiastically. “They’ll sing carols about us every Christmas.”

Blinker blinked a couple of times and then said, “don’t you think we should have cleared this plan with Santa Claus? That would have avoided a lot of scrambling on our part, furtive or otherwise.”

“We’ve been through this,” said Nedd. “Christmas is only a week away. By the time we cleared this through the NPNDCA⁸ we’d be far too late.”

“And even then, we’d still need approval from the NPSPD⁹,” said Winker.

“Not to mention the NPDPRRSLF¹⁰,” added Blinker.

⁸ North Pole Narcotic and Drug Control Agency. Those guys are real sticklers for detail and procedure. A review by the NPNDCA would have taken months or even years to complete and would undoubtedly have prevented all of the problems that are to come. That would not have made for much of a story though, would it: “Nedd submitted a detailed proposal to the NPNDCA. After 18 months of detailed review and public hearings, it was denied. The end.” You call that a story? That is not a story that I would like to read. So, let us all be thankful that did not happen.

⁹ North Pole Standards and Practices Division. A bunch of the most officious elves you would ever have the misfortune to be officiated by.

Nedd nodded. “Those guys have more red tape than a red tape factory that’s wrapped up in red tape.”

Winker, Blinker and Nedd hunched over and then furtively scrambled the final block to the storage silo. Nedd cradled the tank of *h coli* gently while Winker tried the door. He was surprised to find it unlocked, and then realized that there was no point locking the door of a storeroom full of dolls that nobody wants.

The door swung open and Winker, Blinker and Nedd found themselves surrounded by rows of shelves filled with Little Miss Henrietta™ dolls that wound around them and rose as high as they could see.

“That’s a lot of Little Miss Henrietta™,” said Winker, blinking his one good eye¹¹ in awe.

“Gosh, they’re cute,” said Blinker. He pulled one from the nearest shelf and gave it a squeeze. It giggled sweetly and blushed. Blinker found himself blushing, too.

“This is no time for playing,” said Nedd. “We have work to do.” He set the tank on the floor and then pulled a red velvet surgical mask over his nose. Winker and Blinker tightened their own surgical masks into place.

Winker gave Nedd a wink. Blinker blinked twice. Nedd nodded and twisted the knob at the top of the tank.

The elves could not see the *horrible coli* germs as they spread throughout the silo, but they could see the effect they had on the thousands of Little Miss Henrietta™ dolls stacked on the shelves.

The dolls on the lowest shelves started murmuring and shuffling as soon as the *horrible coli* reached them. Their skin, once the colour of rose petals, faded to a dull, muddy gray. One of the dolls on the lowest shelf turned and stared at Winker, Blinker and Nedd.

“Brains,” it grunted. “Need brains.” It flopped from the shelf to the floor of the silo and shuffled towards them.

Winker poked Blinker in the arm. “Maybe we should wait outside.”

Blinker looked down at the Little Miss Henrietta™ doll he still held in his arm. Its green face glared at him with hunger. “Brains,” it snarled and snapped at his sleeve. It held onto his arm with his teeth until Blinker finally shook it loose. It flopped onto the ground and then shambled forward and grabbed his leg and started chewing at his pant cuff. Blinker kicked at the doll and it slid

¹⁰ The North Pole Department of Pointless Rules, Regulations, Statistics and Lengthy Forms. It is a truism at the North Pole and every other pole that the more initials an organization has, the more useless and bureaucratic it must be.

¹¹ Is it winking if a one eyed elf blinks? I am just not sure.

across the floor, where it bumped into a group of other dolls. It rose slowly on its unsteady legs and the group of new Zombie Maniac™ dolls started shuffling towards them.

“Blinker’s right. We should wait outside,” said Nedd.

Winker, Blinker and Nedd rushed out of the silo. Nedd slammed the door shut and leaned against it. He could feel dozens of little bodies pushing against it from the other side.

Little green fingers pressed out of the bottom of the door. Winker and Blinker pressed their shoulders against the door to keep it closed.

“How long do you think we are going to have to hold this door shut?” asked Winker. He really wished there was a way to lock it from the outside.

“Not for very much longer,” said Blinker.

Nedd smiled. “Why not?”

Blinker pointed to the first floor window beside the door. A Zombie Maniac™ doll had pushed it open and was climbing through it. It fell from the window sill onto the snow below. Another Zombie Maniac™ doll tumbled out after it, followed by a third and then too many Zombie Maniacs™ to count.

They turned to Winker, Blinker and Nedd and started to head their way.

“I think we better make a run for it,” said Nedd, but Winker and Blinker already had a head start and were slowly shrinking elves in the distance.

Nedd realized that there was no future for the slowest person in a group with a horde of Zombie Maniac™ dolls on their heels. Nedd let out an unelfy scream and sprinted after his friends.

THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

DO YOU REMEMBER THAT BIT AT THE BEGINNING of the story about the law of unintended consequences? Winker, Blinker and Nedd only wanted to save Christmas. They had the best of intentions.

And now a shambling, brain starved horde of Zombie Maniac™ dolls is making its way down Peppermint Lane. Sometimes the best of intentions only lead to drooling, shuffling, ravenous consequences.

Something to think about.

THE MANIACAL ZOMBIES

SOMEELF WAS SHOUTING OUTSIDE. Iggy looked out the window over his workbench. He saw Winker, Blinker and Nedd run up Peppermint Lane with a small crowd of little green dolls shuffling behind them. “That’s something you don’t see every day,” he said, and passed another partially assembled Zombie Maniac™ doll to Yugo.

“You certainly don’t,” agreed Yugo. He expertly twisted another drooling green head on the doll’s body.

“They don’t seem to be scrambling so furtively now,” said Sam. He slapped some fake blood on the doll and tossed it into the wheeled cart at the end of the workbench.

“It’s a bit scrambly, but it isn’t furtive,” said Iggy.

Yugo set his fourth dimensional pincers on the workbench. “Those elves are running for their lives.”

Sam looked at the Zombie Maniac™ doll in his hand. “Those dolls aren’t supposed to act like that.” He turned the doll over and pulled the cord in its back. It spat something black and said “brains,” in a hungry sort of way, but then was still.

Iggy stared out the window. “You’re right Sam. Those dolls are much more maniacal than they should be. And they seem pretty determined to get some brains,” he said.

Yugo set down all of the multi-dimensional pincers he had and leaned into the window. He could see hundreds of Zombie Maniac™ dolls winding up Peppermint Lane, with their arms outstretched. They chanted “brains” in an unholy chorus. Yugo had the best brain at the North Pole (quite possibly the best brain in the entire world) and he did not want any Zombie Maniac™ doll with even more authentic brain chewing action than usual getting anywhere near it. “We’re the only ones here,” he said. “It’s going to be up to us to do something about this.”

“I’m on it,” said Sam. He slipped down from his stool and headed to the elves locker room. Iggy and Yugo looked at each other and then followed him.

Iggy tapped Sam on the shoulder when he reached his locker. “You’re on it?” he asked. “You usually run away and hide from this sort of thing.”

“Very fast, too,” added Yugo.

Sam made a face and reached into his locker. “Not this time. I’ve been expecting something like this for a long time.” Sam is a naturally pessimistic elf. If he was presented with the proverbial glass half full or empty question, he

would answer that the glass was half empty and the water inside was probably contaminated. A pessimist like Sam expects some sort of apocalypse to arrive every day.

Sam's locker was more than a place to hang his hat. It was filled with the things every practical pessimist accumulates for the day Armageddon arrives: cans of ham, bottled water, flashlights, batteries and duct tape. He pulled out a shovel and gave it an experimental swing. He nodded, satisfied. He stuffed a water bottle and a roll of duct tape into his pockets. He passed another roll to Iggy.

"What's this for?" asked Iggy.

"It's duct tape. You're going to need it. It's the most useful thing in the world."

Iggy and Yugo looked at Sam in stunned silence. "Look, I'm an expert at this," said Sam. "I've seen all of the movies. *Dawn of the Dead*. *Night of the Dead*. *Dusk of the Dead*. *Twilight of the Dead*. I've seen *The Living Dead*, *The Walking Dead*, *The Jogging Dead* and *The Surfing Dead in 3-D*. Classics, all of them. If I've learned anything from my research, it's this: the only way to deal with a zombie uprising is with a shovel to the back of the head or a kick in the fork. Now, you two better get ready. There's an apocalypse happening out there."

Sam strode out of the locker room with a determined expression on his chubby face. Iggy and Yugo ran around the workshop looking for anything that might help. Yugo found an aluminum baseball bat. Iggy grabbed a toy machine gun that shot foam rubber darts with little suction cups on the end. He pocketed a few clips of rubber darts and joined the others.

Sam took one look at Iggy and shook his head. "You're going to wish you had a shovel."

Iggy just smiled. Unlike Sam, he was naturally optimistic. To him, all glasses were completely full, even if most of what they were filled with was just air. He was sure that his toy gun would work, because he could not imagine it any other way.

Sam kicked the door open and led Iggy and Yugo out into the dark, snow covered street. "Let's go," he said. The street was paved with peppermint cobblestones, which look great in pictures, but make for slippery footing in the snowy weather at the North Pole. Sam was prepared for this, too. He wore sturdy hiking boots with metal spikes on the sole. He stepped out into the middle of Peppermint Lane, with Iggy and Yugo slipping along behind him in their red velvet boots with curly pointed toes.

The horde of crazed *Zombie Maniac™* dolls approached from the North. They were hideous. A shambling mob of growling, grasping and spitting dolls; each scarcely a foot high. The plastic skin peeled away from their gray faces, exposing their dark and dripping insides. Their eyes blazed with a psychotic fury. They gnashed their teeth and chanted "braaiins," over and over. There

was no sign of Little Miss Henrietta™ anywhere. Just hundreds and hundreds of Zombie Maniac™ dolls shuffling up the cobblestones.

“Let’s fan out,” said Sam. He gestured to Iggy to flank him on his left and to Yugo to join him on the right side. “They will be slow and stupid. The reason they crave brains is because they don’t have any. They can’t handle us one on one. Their strength is in numbers. Don’t let them get too close, and whatever you do, don’t let them bite you.”

He pulled a roll of duct tape from his pocket and wrapped it around his calves. He passed the roll to Iggy. “Put some of this on. It will help keep you safe.”

“What happens if they bite us?” asked Iggy.

Sam pointed at the approaching crowd with his shovel. “You turn into one of them.”

Iggy gulped and wrapped the duct tape around his green leggings. He tossed the roll to Yugo.

“It’s time,” said Sam and he stepped forward to meet the first of the shambling Zombie Maniacs™. In this case, he met it with a tremendous swing of his shovel, driving it several feet in the air. He swivelled and kicked the second approaching Zombie Maniac™, right in the fork, with his heavy boot. It crumpled to the ground in a tattered heap.

Yugo swung his bat from side to side, clearing away the Zombie Maniac™ dolls before they could get within chewing distance of his remarkable brain. It was tiring work, and there were still hundreds of Zombie Maniacs™ labouring towards them. “There’s too many of them!” he shouted. Zombie Maniacs™ were clambering around his feet and pulling at the duct tape that protected his red velvet leggings.

“Just keep at it,” said Sam. “They go down pretty easy if you hit them in the unmentionables.” Sam stabbed at the one closest to Yugo one with the end of his shovel and it fell down with its green hands clutched between its legs.

Iggy retreated a few feet and raised his toy machine gun.

Sam turned and shouted at him. “Come on Iggy, get in the fight. You aren’t doing any good with that thing.”

Iggy just smiled. He knew in his heart that no matter how dire things seemed that it would all work out for the best in the end. It always had, hadn’t it? He glared at the oncoming Zombie Maniacs™ and rattled off a round of rubber darts.

Sam shook his head while he flattened a Zombie Maniac™ with a backhanded swing of his shovel. He feinted to his left to distract one and then drilled it with the toe of his boot. “Ha!” he shouted. “Right in the jingle bells.” The Zombie Maniac™ fell to the snow in mortal agony.

Sam stepped up to the next Zombie Maniac™ and raised his shovel. But before he could swing it again, a foam rubber dart stuck in its face and it fell to the ground.

He looked to his left and another Zombie Maniac™ flopped onto the snow with a dart in its chest. It jerked for a moment and then lay still.

“How?” asked Sam. Three more Zombie Maniacs™ were hit with darts and collapsed.

Yugo looked puzzled, for a moment or two. He batted away a couple of Zombie Maniacs™ and then his eyes lit up. “Don’t you see, Sam? The dolls aren’t very big. To them, a rubber dart is huge. It would be like you or me being hit with a tree trunk.”

Sam drove his shovel blade into the grimacing face of the nearest Zombie Maniac™. Three more stepped up to take its place. “Change of plans,” he said. He threw his shovel in a snow bank and ran back to the workshop. He reappeared a few moments later with a big blue plastic machine gun in each hand and a long strap stuffed with rubber bullets wrapped over his shoulder three times.

He screamed and leapt at the Zombie Maniacs™, firing rubber darts in all directions. The dolls fell in waves at the ferocity of his onslaught, growling and grasping at the snow and before shuddering to a stop. Yugo soon joined him and the three elves walked slowly up the street, spraying rubber ordnance into the mob. Sam kicked at the occasional Zombie Maniac™ doll that avoided the rubber darts, but there were not many of those. Most of the Zombie Maniacs™ were hit by two or three darts, and that was enough to end their part in the rampage.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam were massively outnumbered, but their opponents were small and they were all a little dim. They fell by the dozens before Sam’s ravenous Zombie Maniac™ killing spree. With a dart in the eye here and a kick to the holly berries there, Sam was a one elf Zombie Maniac™ wrecking machine.

Iggy and Yugo could only watch the slaughter before them in amazement. “I never thought he had it in him,” said Yugo.

“I always knew he did,” said Iggy. “He just needed a zombie apocalypse to bring out the best in him.”

It was just so. Sam barrelled into the crowd, shooting Zombie Maniac™ after Zombie Maniac™. “Good. Bad. I’m the elf with the gun,” he yelled as he drilled another two Zombie Maniacs™ between their gleaming green eyes. They fell back onto their brethren and then Sam shot those dolls, too.

He reached a group of Zombie Maniac™ dolls crowded around a candy cane shaped light pole and pulled his trigger. Nothing happened and Sam realized that he had run out of foam rubber darts. The Zombie Maniacs™ shuffled

towards him. Sam batted the first of them away with one of his blue toy machine guns. He took a step back and yelled to Iggy and Yugo. "Hey guys. Little help, please." He looked back and Iggy tossed him a magazine with 50 rubber darts in it. Sam slammed it into his second blue plastic toy machine gun and started firing. "Eat rubber!" he shouted.

It turns out that Zombie Maniac™ dolls lack super rubber dart eating action. Sam pulled his trigger 50 times and 50 Zombie Maniacs™ fell. He hollered for another reload. This time, Iggy just passed his own gun to Sam. He was not using it anymore anyway. Sam was dealing with the whole miniature zombie uprising quite effectively on his own.

Sam led the three of them up Peppermint Lane and around the corner onto Mistletoe Landing, shooting Zombie Maniacs™ all the way. Once they turned the corner, they could see the storage silo where the Zombie Maniac™ dolls were still spilling out and crawling up the road. Their numbers were thinning out a bit, but that did not slow Sam down even a little. He shot another two in the throat and then kicked a third one in the midsection. "Right in the plum pudding," Sam bragged later in the lunch room.

Iggy and Yugo followed close behind Sam, dispatching the occasional Zombie Maniac™ that he missed, but there were not too many of those. For the most part, they were just dealing with stragglers. Iggy hit one in the shoulder. It kept crawling towards him and he had to shoot it again, right in the shortbread, as Sam later explained to the lunch room crowd. Yugo shot one in the parietal lobe (as he later explained it) and hit another with the butt end of a toy machine gun in the cherry drops (as Sam later described it) when it crept up too close.

They finally reached the storage silo that once held 10,000 Little Miss Henrietta™ dolls and which now held one last, drooling straggling Zombie Maniac™. Sam took one look at the sole pathetic straggling, shuffling doll and then he kicked it, as hard as he could, right in the fork (as the lunch room crowd would hear over and over again).

The three elves turned around and surveyed the wave of destruction that they had left behind them. Ten thousand Zombie Maniac™ dolls lay still in the snow, disabled by foam rubber bullets, the working end of a spade and the occasional boot to the candy canes (as Sam might say).

Sam holstered his two battered blue plastic machine guns and slapped his hands together. "I guess that's that. Christmas has been saved again. Glad I could help. I expect a little something extra in my next pay packet for this inconvenience."

Iggy and Yugo nodded blankly at the sight of the destruction Sam had waged on the Zombie Maniacs™.

That was incredible, Iggy thought.

That is an elf with a boxcar full of psychoses, Yugo thought.

But, they kept these thoughts to themselves. How could they argue with success? Sam had turned back a miniature zombie apocalypse and had surely saved Christmas on his own. That was something that would be discussed in the lunch room for weeks to come.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam holstered their big blue plastic machine guns and gathered all of the Zombie Maniac™ dolls into a big heap right at the intersection of Peppermint Road and Candy Cane Lane.

“There’s only one thing to do with dead undead,” he said. He flicked open a lighter and tossed it onto the heap. Ten thousand maniacs¹² burst into flame and burned so brightly the bonfire that could be seen from space. Indeed, the astronauts of the International Space Station logged a “brilliant atmospheric event in the region of the North Pole that evening.

It was in a triumphant, saved Christmas once again like we always do, frame of mind that Iggy, Yugo and Sam made their way back to the common room of Elves Barracks B, filled with stories of zombie mayhem and Sam’s unexpected heroism when they ran into a most perturbed Nedd.

And that was when, as Sam liked to say, the stuffing got real.

THE REAL STUFFING

NEDD’S COMPLEXION WAS GRAY AND WAXEN. He grabbed Iggy by the lapels of his red velvet jacket and started shaking. This is to say, that Nedd started shaking Iggy. Nedd was already shaking when he arrived.¹³

“Zombies!” he shouted. “Zombies!”

Iggy smiled and pried Nedd’s fingers from his collar. “Yes we know. We’ve dealt with it.”

“Yes we did,” said Yugo. “Well, it was Sam mostly.”

Sam beamed and patted the blue plastic machine gun at his side. “Me and the Zombiezapper. That’s what I’m calling her.”

Nedd blubbered. “Not the dolls. Zombies. Real zombies!”

¹² 10,000 Maniacs is an American alternative rock band that had a pretty good run in the early 1980’s. No band members were consumed in flames or otherwise harmed in the writing of this story.

¹³ Gosh, pronouns can be tricky sometimes.

Iggy placed his arm around Nedd's shoulder. "It's all right. Sam got all the zombies. Why don't you come in? You look like you could use some cranberry tea."

"Maybe even some eggnog," said Yugo.

Sam beamed even more broadly now. "Eggnog would be perfect. Let's go get a pint."

"Please, you don't understand." Nedd was begging now. "I don't want any tea or eggnog. The zombies. The elves are turning into zombies."

Iggy had already seen more zombies than he had ever hoped to. Now he grabbed Nedd by the lapels on his green velvet jacket. "What do you mean the elves are turning into zombies?"

Nedd started blubbering. "We didn't mean any harm. There were too many Little Miss Henrietta™ dolls, and not enough Zombie Maniacs™. We figured out an easy way to turn the Henriettas into Zombie Maniacs."

"How was that?" asked Iggy.

"The *h*. We used the *h*."

"*The horrible coli?*" asked Yugo. Nedd nodded. Yugo stroked his enormous moustache. He was familiar with all of the scientific literature on the *horrible coli*. It was not the sort of thing that should be used on animal tests, let alone helpless dolls. "You thought you could play Santa." He looked at Nedd with sadness. "But now you've interfered with the law of supply and demand. That only leads to unintended consequences."

"But we got all the Zombie Maniacs™. Me and the Zombiezapper." Sam looked at Iggy and Yugo. "And you guys too, of course."

"Sam's right," said Iggy. "We got all of the Zombie Maniacs™."

Nedd shook his head. "It's not the dolls anymore. Blinker was holding one of the dolls when we changed them. After that, everything got growly and bitey. One of them bit Blinker. We didn't realize it then because we were too busy running away."

"Not at all furtively," Sam interjected.

Nedd gulped and continued. "As soon as we got back to the lab, it was clear that something was wrong. Blinker was kind of green and his teeth were all crooked. His eyes were red and glassy. He started lurching and grasping and growling for brains. We tried to lock him in his lab, but that only made him really grabby and snappy."

"How grabby," asked Iggy.

"How snappy?" asked Yugo.

"He bit Winker. It wasn't long before Winker became all gray and lurchy and graspy and bitey, too." Nedd was little dazed. He paused for a moment to

collect his thoughts. “It got too weird for me, so I ran straight here. They say you are the guys to see when things get weird.”

Iggy looked at Yugo who looked at Sam who looked at Iggy. They gave a collective shrug. They did not take any offence at Nedd’s remark because they knew, like all of the other elves at the North Pole knew, that they were the ones that other elves looked to when things got weird.

Yugo gave Nedd a studious look. “Where are Winker and Blinker now?”

Nedd just sobbed. “I don’t know.” Then he hiccupped and said, “brains.” His eyes opened wide and he tried to cover his mouth. He lowered his hand, looked at Yugo with an evil sneer and growled “brains” again. He snatched at Yugo’s scalp. Yugo stepped back and Nedd only grabbed his green cap with the bell at the top.

Nedd was about to lunge at Yugo again when Sam hit him in the back of the head with his shovel. Which is to say that Sam hit Nedd and not Yugo with the business end of a shovel.¹⁴ Nedd collapsed like a large bag of mandarin oranges on the floor.

Iggy looked at Nedd’s still gray form and cried, “Sam! What did you do?”

“Nedd’s gone green,” said Sam. “There’s only one way to deal with the likes of him. The back side of a shovel or ... “

“... a kick in the fork,” Yugo finished his thought.

“You can’t hit people with shovels,” said Iggy.

Sam gave Nedd’s still form a shove with the toe of his heavy boot. “This elf ain’t people anymore. He’s one of the unspeakable.”

“What does that mean?” asked Iggy.

“I can’t speak of it,” replied Sam.

Yugo pressed a hand against Nedd’s gray green neck. “At least you didn’t kill him,” he said.

Sam lifted his chin and clenched his jaw. He unclenched it a bit only to say, “if I’ve learned one thing from the *Teatime of the Dead (in 3-D)*, it’s this: you can’t kill something that’s already dead. You can only stun them for a bit.” He immediately re clenched his jaw.

“He seems good and stunned,” said Iggy.

“He’s only stunned,” said Yugo. “But he’s become a *Zombie Maniac™*, just like the dolls.”

“He said that Winker and Blinker were already *Zombie Maniacs™*,” said Sam. He gripped his shovel handle tightly.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

“We need to find them,” said Iggy.

“We don’t know where they are,” said Yugo.

“They could be anywhere,” said Sam, giving the shovel an experimental swing or two.

“And if they’ve bitten anyone ...,” said Iggy.

“Then they’ll be Zombie Maniacs™, too,” said Yugo, finishing Iggy’s thought. Yugo does that a lot.

Sam pulled his shovel back and tightened his grip on the handle. “Sounds like that business with the dolls was just the appetizer, boys. The stuffing just got real.”

THE TAPERING FINGERS

IGGY, YUGO AND SAM PACKED THE STUNNED NEDD into the janitor’s room of Elves Barracks B. At first they propped him up on one of the couches at the back of the common room, but he smelled like something dead and they had to move him. The janitor’s closet seemed the best place. They even found some disinfectant to spray on him in the hope that he would smell a little fresher. However, after Iggy had doused him with a half bottle of the stuff, Nedd just smelled like a disinfected zombie.

Sam filled a pint glass with eggnog and guzzled it down. He set down the glass, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and said, “now what?”

“We need to find Winker and Blinker before they can cause any more trouble,” said Iggy.

“Nedd said that he left them at the lab,” said Yugo. “They work out of ECDDC. We should start there.”

“Let’s get a move on, then,” said Sam. He holstered the Zombiezapper, grabbed his shovel and poured himself another pint of eggnog.

The three elves marched out of Elves Barracks B and made their way up Candy Cane Way. They worked their way through all of the noise and bustle at the corner of Santa Claus Lane and then walked on, past the Mistletoe Manor and the Arctic Game Station until they reached Peppermint Road. They were so focussed on reaching their destination that they did not notice any sounds of breaking glass, guttural groans or screams for help. They only cared about reaching the squat gray building that housed the NPRDB emerged slowly through the Arctic mist.

“Here we are,” said Iggy.

Yugo walked gingerly up to the front door and carefully eased it open.

“Lock and load,” said Sam. He pumped the Zombiezapper to load a fresh foam rubber round in the chamber and stomped through the open door. He raised the Zombiezapper to his shoulder and turned on the lights with his elbow.

“What happened here?” said Iggy, close behind.

The main entrance of the NPRDB was in shambles. There were jagged holes in the mahogany wainscoting¹⁵ and the overhead lights dangled unevenly from bare power cables. Dark, greasy marks were smeared on the walls. A big framed portrait of Santa Claus shaking the hand of Dr. Rubert Skinnyknees, head of the NPRDB that once hung above the doorway lay on the floor in tatters.

Sam sniffed and then muttered, “zombies.” He led Iggy and Yugo across the cracked linoleum. He kicked open the first door they reached, then slowly peered through the opening. There was nothing there, but Sam sprayed the room with a few rounds from the Zombiezapper, just to be sure. He inspected the room carefully once the last dart had finished bouncing around, but all he saw were some broken beakers and a university degree with a dart stuck to it. He pulled the dart from the glass and stuffed it in his pocket. “All clear, let’s move on.”

They followed the same procedure at the next door and the following one and then the one after that. Kick, peer and spray. They made their way in this fashion up to the second floor. They paused before a wooden door with a glazed glass window which bore hand painted letters in a Franklin font:

Nedder Shakespeare, Ph.D.
Scholar, Scientist, Hand Model

Iggy inhaled slowly. “This is Nedd’s lab,” he said.

Yugo took in the words on the door and said, “I did not know that Nedd was a hand model.”

Sam just stared at him. “Are you kidding me?”

“Oh yes,” said Iggy. “Nedd’s hands are exquisite. Beautiful, tapering fingers. And his nails are perfect.”

“I never noticed,” said Yugo.

“I can’t believe that,” said Iggy. “You really need to slow down a little and appreciate these things.”

Yugo stroked his moustache idly and said, “you may be right.”

¹⁵ ‘Wainscoting’ is a fancy word that means wood panelling. It is believed to have been named after a couple of fancy guys named Wayne and Scott, though this is the subject of some controversy. Things would be simpler if it had been named after one fancy guy named ‘Woody’.

Sam stared so hard at Iggy and Yugo that his eyeballs hurt. “Are you kidding me?” he said again. “Nedd’s got the zombie mania. There’s nothing exquisite about him or his tapering fingers or any of the rest of his heathen kind.” He slammed another clip into the Zombiezapper and said, “let’s get in there and put them down.”

Iggy nodded grimly and kicked the door.

Yugo peered inside.

Sam leapt into the doorway and sprayed the lab with a burst of foam rubber darts.

He did not notice any broken beakers this time. His attention was fully occupied by the green drooling elf in a soiled and ragged velvet jacket that shuffled towards them with outstretched arms. Its head hung heavily to the side and there were two foam rubber darts stuck to its forehead. It groaned, but all it said was, “brains.”

Sam could not tell whether the elf lunging at him was a man or a woman. He did not really care. He dived to the side and squeezed off another few rounds from the Zombiezapper. Three more darts stuck to the zombie’s face, but it still lurched towards him. “It’s not working!” he yelled.

“That’s not a doll,” said Yugo. “Those little darts are useless now.”

“Now you tell me,” said Sam. He pumped the Zombiezapper and fired another fusillade at the approaching zombie anyway.

“There’s only one way to stop it!” shouted Iggy.

“Either a shovel to the back of the head,” said Yugo.

“Or a kick in the fork,” said Sam. This time, he finished Yugo’s thought, and then he finished the zombie elf with a swift kick to the cranberries. It crumpled to the floor, immobile.

Iggy ran up to the ragged form on the ground. He looked it over quickly and then turned to Yugo and Sam. “This isn’t Winker.”

“It’s not Blinker, either,” said Yugo.

“How can that be?” asked Iggy.

“Winker or Blinker must have bitten this elf, given it the zombie mania and then got away,” said Yugo. “Who knows how many others they might have infected by now.”

Sam tossed his useless Zombiezapper into the corner. “We’re going to need more shovels,” he said.

THE PRACTICAL SHOVELS

NOBODY KNOWS WHY THERE IS A GARDENER'S SHED at the North Pole. There is nothing for a gardener to do there, because entire place is made of an ice cap¹⁶ with no land mass at all. There is not a speck of dirt anywhere at the North Pole and there are no trees or plants of any kind there. It is a mystery that there is even a gardener's shed at all.

Fortunately for Iggy, Yugo and Sam, the gardener's shed was located across the street from the NPRDB building. Inside, they found several shovels that had never been used. Iggy chose the S519I trench shovel, built by the Newton Manufacturing Co. of Lafayette, Indiana. Yugo likewise selected the S519I trench shovel, as did Sam. As it turned out, all of the shovels in the gardener's shed were the S519I trench shovel, built by the Newton Manufacturing Co. of Lafayette, Indiana.

The S519I is a fine shovel. The blade is made of two tone carbonized steel. The shaft is made of ash, the same wood used to make baseball bats. It is light and easy to swing. The handles are built from a stiff rubber compound that is easily gripped by even the smallest hands, such as those of the adult Arctic elf. It breaks ground easily, turns earth quickly and can be swung with surprising vigor. It is a good, practical shovel for spring planting and bashing zombies about the head.

Iggy weighed his shovel tentatively in his hands. Yugo inspected his to see how the blade was joined to the shaft. Sam swung his like he was aiming for the center field bleachers at Yankee Stadium. Each of them pronounced the S519I to be perfectly suited for the task ahead.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam stepped out of the gardener's shed and onto Fruitcake Alley. The alley was a favoured hangout of sugar addicts, those poor elves who were hooked on candy canes and chocolates with cherries in them. They would do almost anything to get their next sugar high.

"Keep an eye out for sugar addicts," said Iggy.

"And zombies," said Yugo.

A low rumbling noise came from around the next corner. Sam did not wait to investigate. He leapt around the corner, shovel swinging. There was a great clanging noise and then Sam stepped back out into the street.

"Just a sugar addict," he said. "He won't need any peppermint sticks for a while."

¹⁶ The polar ice cap is 20 meters thick in places. It might be a little less than that with global warming. Even so, it's more ice than you can put in a cocktail.

Iggy ran around the corner and found an elf lying prone in the snow, with a big welt forming on the side of his head. He flipped the unconscious elf onto his back and a half dozen sugar cubes tumbled out of his pocket.

“Sam, you have to be more careful. You can’t just brain every elf you see.”

“Zombies only,” said Yugo.

Just then, a dark figure appeared behind Iggy and grasped at his green pointed cap. Despite Iggy and Yugo’s admonitions, Sam did not wait to diagnose the figure with zombie mania or sugar addiction. He just swung away. There was a reverberating clang and the dark figure fell backwards.

Iggy spun and looked at the gray green elf lying in the snow. It was clear that this elf, at least, had the zombie mania.

“Who is it?” asked Yugo. “Winker or Blinker?”

Iggy shook his head. “I don’t think so. But he looks a little familiar.”

Sam looked at the back of his shovel. There was a smeared image of a grinning happy face symbol on the blade. “I think it’s Razzlebutton,” he said.

“How can you tell?” asked Iggy.

Sam showed them the back of his shovel. “Razzlebutton has a happy face tattoo on his cheek, just like the one on my shovel.”

Yugo looked back at the unconscious zombie elf. Its cheek was blue and swollen, but there was no happy face there. “You smacked the tattoo right off him!”

Sam grinned. Then he took a pen out of his pocket and made a mark on the handle of his shovel. “That’s one.”

“Two,” said Iggy. “You forgot about the one in the lab.”

“Three,” said Yugo. “He took out Nedd, too.”

“You’re right,” said Sam, and added another pair of marks to the handle.

“We need to move on before Winker and Blinker get to anyone else,” said Yugo.

The three elves collected their shovels and headed up Fruitcake Alley. There was the occasional sound of screaming and breaking glass, but no sign of Winker or Blinker anywhere. They reached the next block and turned right onto Holly Wreath Road. This block was usually much brighter than Fruitcake Alley, but all of the candy cane shaped street lights were out, leaving the street in darkness.

Something growled right in front of them. Sam swung his shovel blindly. There was a familiar clang, followed a moment later by a familiar plopping sound.

“Four,” said Sam.

Iggy and Yugo started swinging their shovels wildly in the darkness. Sam slipped a pulled a headlamp from his pocket and strapped it to his forehead. Something growled and Sam turned and shone his headlight on it. A drooling zombie staggered towards him. Sam gripped the handle of his shovel with both hands and cross checked the drooling elf in the throat. It croaked a single word, “brains,” and then Sam kicked it firmly between the legs and it went down without another sound.

“Never forget the kick in the fork,” said Sam. “It works every time. I got that one right in the sugar cookies.”

It was difficult work getting down Holly Wreath Road in the dark. Sam’s headlamp provided a little light, but for the most part they were fighting blind. Iggy swung his shovel back and forth before him, but it only clanged once. Yugo was only a little more successful; three zombies clanged off of his shovel. Sam was much more dangerous. By the time they reached the next block, he had added another twelve marks to his shovel handle.

None of the twelve were Winker or Blinker. They recognized Chestnuts and Tark, despite their green pallor and extensive shovel induced bruising and other facial injuries.

A few of the streetlights were still lit on the next block. They could see at least twenty shadowy elves slowly shambling in random loops in the middle of the road.

“This is terrible,” said Iggy. “There are zombies everywhere. I thought it was just Winker and Blinker. How can there be so many?”

“It’s a geometric progression,” explained Yugo. “If Winker and Blinker each bit two elves, and those elves bit two others, and so on, the number of infected elves will grow exponentially¹⁷. It will double and redouble until every elf at the North Pole has the zombie mania.”

“How long will that take?” asked Sam.

Yugo shrugged. “It might not take very long at all. It might only take a few hours.”

At the sound of math, the shadowy elves stopped, and then shuffled towards them. They moved awkwardly, but more quickly than Iggy expected, and he barely had time to raise his shovel to force the first zombie back. Yugo took one down with his shovel and a second with a good sturdy kick. Sam took down two with a single mighty swing, and a third with a toe to the Christmas crackers (as Sam later described it).

¹⁷ Nobody said that there would be math in this story, but the rate of growth in the number of zombie elves can be calculated using the following formula, $a_n = a_1 r^{n-1}$. Where a represents a single elf, r is the number of times that elf might bite another elf and n represents the total number of elves at the North Pole (currently, 4053).

That left another dozen or more zombies which swiftly converged on them. "Get down!" shouted Sam. Iggy and Yugo ducked beneath Sam's swing and another zombie fell.

"There's too many of them," said Iggy.

"We're going to need help," said Yugo.

"Who can help us? They're all zombies." said Sam. He cracked his shovel over another zombie's head and kicked at a second one until it stopped moving. "Ha! Right in the run and eggnog!"

"There." Iggy pointed at the tall building a short distance away. It was the Santa Claus Tower, the headquarters of Santa Claus' vast toy making and distribution operation. It stood 24 stories high and was built right on the North Pole itself. "If anyone can help us, Santa Claus can."

"Iggy's right," said Yugo. "Santa Claus will know what to do." He slashed at one zombie with his shovel and it fell to the ground awkwardly.

Sam jumped over the fallen zombie and bashed a small band of zombies with his shovel. The first three dropped, but the fourth lunged at Sam. Sam stepped back, then choked up on his shovel and swung again. This time the zombie fell and did not get up.

Iggy looked at the heap and said, "I think those zombies were Jimmy and the Penguins."

"Really," said Yugo. "I love their stuff."

"Yeah, they're great," said Iggy.

"Have you heard *Live at the Arctic Cliffs*?" asked Yugo.

"Of course," said Iggy. "That album is a classic."

There were a couple of loud clangs and then Sam said, "this is not a good time for music reviews, guys. I could use a little help here."

Iggy hit one zombie with his shovel just as it was about to fall onto Sam's back. Yugo took a low swing that caught another zombie in the groin. It tumbled over onto its side."

"Good one," said Sam. "Right in the mashed potatoes. Looks like a shovel to the fork works just as well as a kick." There were only three zombies still standing, and Iggy, Yugo and Sam took them out with three quick clangs of their S519Is. They turned and jogged towards the Santa Claus Tower. One zombie elf which was hunched over a spilled trash can looked up at them as they passed. Sam slapped him to the ground with his shovel without even breaking his stride. "Twenty seven!" he shouted.

"I think that was Winker!" said Iggy. He turned back to have another look.

"Keep running," said Yugo. "There are so many elves that have been infected it doesn't matter if we find Winker and Blinker anymore."

Iggy nodded and ran up to Yugo and Sam. They turned onto Santa Claus Lane. Iggy stopped to wait for the light to change before crossing the street to the Tower, but Yugo and Sam kept on running.

A snowmobile careened down the street, driven by an enraged zombie. Yugo and Sam dove to the sidewalk as it slid past them and then crashed into a guardrail. Iggy just shook his head and then carefully crossed the street once the light turned green.

There was a zombie stuck in the revolving front door. Iggy gently eased the door open. The zombie lurched out and Yugo smacked it with his shovel. The zombie fell back against the front of the building and slid down the glass.

“Oh no,” said Sam. He recognized this elf. It was his occasional girlfriend, Nutmeg. He had never made it to their date and now she was a zombie maniac. He took off his cap and wiped a tear from his eye. “We need to put this right.”

Iggy put his arm around Sam’s shoulder.

“Santa will know what to do,” said Yugo. Together, the three friends stepped into the building.

THE INNUMERABLE STAIRS

THERE WAS NO SOUND AS IGGY, YUGO AND SAM crossed the lobby. Usually Christmas carols played softly from hidden speakers, but it was silent this night. Some of the overhead lights were blinking on and off. They reached the security desk at the entrance to the elevators. There was no elf there and the desk was tipped over onto its side.

“That’s odd,” said Iggy.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” said Yugo. Iggy would have had a bad feeling about it, but he never had a bad feeling about anything.

They squeezed around the desk and walked up to the elevators. Iggy pressed the call button. Nothing happened. The button did not light up and there was no familiar ping of an elevator arriving on their floor.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” said Sam. Sam always had a bad feeling about everything, so this was not particularly surprising.

“I think the elevator is out,” said Iggy.

“We’ll have to take the stairs,” said Yugo.

“Are you crazy?” said Sam. “It’s 24 stories to Santa’s office. That’s innumerable stairs!”

“Come on, Sam. It’s not that far,” said Iggy. He opened the door to the stairwell.

“And it’s terrific exercise,” added Yugo.

Sam only grunted. Walking up the stairs to his front door was more exercise than he liked. He was about 3 and a half feet tall and weighed 27 stone.¹⁸ Despite his prowess with a shovel and a metal toed boot, Sam was dreadfully out of shape. For an elf in his condition, walking up 24 flights of stairs was about the same as walking to the moon.

By the time they reached the second floor, Sam was labouring for breath. Sweat poured down his round face and dripped onto his jacket. He grabbed the railing with his free hand and struggled up a second flight of stairs. He set down his shovel at the next landing and bent over with his hands on his knees.

“You’re doing great,” said Iggy, cheerfully. “Only 22 more flights.”

Sam coughed a few times then pulled himself up onto the next step. “How much further now?”

“Only another 285 steps,” said Yugo.

Sam stopped for a rest 11 steps later and another rest 6 steps after that. By the time he had climbed a further 37 steps he was sure that he was going to have a heart attack. Twenty six steps later he was sure that he had and decided to lie down for a bit. It was not very comfortable lying down in the middle of a flight of concrete stairs, but to Sam it was still better than walking. He wheezed. “Are we there yet?”

“Almost,” said Iggy. “It’s only 16 more floors.”

Sam struggled to his feet and climbed another couple of steps before he lay down again. He gulped down a few deep breaths, then pulled himself up and managed another 15 steps before he fell down to his knees. He crawled up another couple of flights and then lay down again beside a bare metal door with the number **13** written in plain red numerals.

¹⁸ One ‘stone’ is equal to 14 pounds, or 6.35 kilograms. An elf who weighs 17 stone accordingly weighs 378 pounds or 172 kilograms. The term derives from a specific stone that was used to weigh things. No one knows where it is now, but if one were to find the original weighing stone, it would probably be worth its weight in gold. Particularly if it was made of gold.

As an aside, a stone of gold is currently worth \$9,514,670.24. That is one valuable rock.

Sam gasped. “I didn’t think there was a 13th floor in this building.”¹⁹

“It’s a mechanical floor,” said Yugo.

“Just 11 more to go,” said Iggy.

The next six floors passed in a huffing and puffing blur. Sam stopped to catch his breath on every step. He gulped for air a few times, then slowly raised his foot to the next step and did it again. He was 221 steps from the bottom when he sat down to rest. Then he crawled up a few more steps and took another rest. He was asleep in moments.

Iggy and Yugo kicked him awake in the middle of a prodigiously tough snore. Sam sat up and struggled to get his thoughts together. “Only another 39 steps,”²⁰ said Yugo. Sam pulled his thoughts together and thought that he would like to go back to sleep, but Iggy and Yugo would have none of it.

Sam would never be able to explain how he scaled those last 39 steps and finally reached the 24th floor of the Santa Claus Tower, only one hour and 23 minutes after they had begun their ascent. But make it they did, and open the door with the number **24** written upon it in plain red numerals, they did.

It was dark on the 24th floor, as dark as the North Pole on December 21. Which was exactly what it was. Iggy felt for the light switch on the wall and then flipped it up. Nothing happened, so he flipped it down. At least the hall did not get any darker, thought Iggy.

Sam turned on his headlamp, which cast a narrow beam of light down the middle of the wide hallway and tightened his grip on his shovel handle. They made no sound as they crept carefully forward on the thick red carpet. A steadily growing spot from Sam's headlamp shone on the heavy walnut door at the end of the hall, illuminating a gleaming brass plate that read:

¹⁹ Many buildings do not have a 13th floor because most tenants will not occupy that floor due to triskaidekaphobia, the superstitious fear of the number 13. Because of this, it is a common practice for building designers to omit the 13th floor of a tall building. Indeed, 85% of buildings in North America have no 13th floor. Sometimes the 13th floor is simply renumbered as the 14th floor, even though it is really the 13th floor. In other cases, mechanical equipment like boilers and air conditioners are housed on the 13th floor instead of superstitious people (or elves).

The 13th Floor is also the name of an Australian rock and roll band. No band members were forced to climb stairs or were otherwise harmed in the writing of this story.

²⁰ *The 39 Steps* is a thriller directed by Alfred Hitchcock in 1935. It has nothing to do with Christmas, elves or zombies.

<p style="text-align: center;">Santa Claus Chief Executive Officer</p>

Iggy was the first elf to reach the door. He reached up and knocked gently under the brass plate. Iggy's knock was usually answered with a booming "come in!" followed by a jolly, "ho, ho, ho." There was no answer this time, so He knocked again, a little more loudly.

"Let me give it a try," said Yugo. He rapped on the door with his shovel handle. There was still no answer.

"Leaping lords," said Sam. "We've come this far. We can let ourselves in." He turned the large brass knob and pushed open the heavy door. He shone his headlamp around the enormous office. It settled on a dark bearded figure seated behind the massive oak desk. He wore a torn red jacket trimmed with stained white fur. His beard was dirty and tangled. His eyes were cold and dark. If there was a word that meant the opposite of 'twinkling', that word would perfectly describe those eyes.

The figure rose from his padded leather seat. He walked clumsily onwards them. His swollen grey lips curled back from his blackened teeth. "Ho. Ho. Ho." He growled.

Iggy's eyes grew wide. "Santa Claus?"

Santa Claus lurched forward and said, "brains." He reached for Iggy, but Yugo pulled him back.

"He's not Santa Claus, anymore," said Yugo.

"He's one of them," said Sam, gritting his teeth. "A demon of the grave. We have to take him down."

"Not Santa Claus," said Iggy. His eyes filled with tears.

Zombie Santa grabbed Iggy's thin arm and pulled him closer.

"Hit him with your shovel, Iggy!" Yugo shouted.

Iggy waved his shovel meekly. "I can't," he said. Zombie Santa bent down and bared his teeth.

"You have to," said Yugo.

Sam jumped forward, shovel swinging. He hit the big bearded man in the belly, just as he was about to bite Iggy on the shoulder. Zombie Santa stepped back and turned to Sam. Sam swung his shovel again, striking Zombie Santa on the chin. He staggered backwards and Sam hit him again, breaking his shovel

handle across his back. Zombie Santa looked up with a malevolent grin and croaked “ho ho ho.” He jerked back up to his feet and lashed at Sam. Sam cracked him over the head with his broken shovel handle, but Zombie Santa kept coming. He hit him again, but now Santa had wrapped his arms around the chubby elf. He snapped at Sam's cheek.

“The kick Sam, don't forget the kick,” shouted Iggy.

“Aim for the fork,” said Yugo.

Sam nodded. “Right.” He drew his boot back and delivered a crushing kick to the big zombie's groin. Zombie Santa groaned, clutched at his midsection and then toppled to the ground.

Iggy clapped Sam on the back. “You did it.”

“Right in the sugar plum fairies,” said Yugo with a smile.

Sam nudged Santa Claus with the toe of his boot. He rolled over limply and then lay still. His skin was grey and rotted. He was every inch a zombie maniac.

“What are we going to do now?” asked Iggy.

“I don't know,” said Yugo. “Without Santa Claus ... ”

“There won't be any Christmas,” said Sam.

THE SMASHED WALRUS

THE TRIP BACK DOWN THE STAIRWELL OF THE SANTA CLAUS TOWER took nearly as long as the trip up had. Sam stopped every few steps to catch his breath, or to catch a nap, and by the time by they reached the bottom, he looked a little green.

They crossed the lobby but stopped when they reached the front door. They could see through the windows that the building was surrounded by zombie elves. They pressed up against the glass, sneering and grasping and looking for brains.

“Back door,” said Iggy.

“Definitely,” said Yugo.

The elves turned and ran through the lobby to the service door at the back of the building. Iggy opened the door slowly and peered outside. There was a single zombie elf nearby. Yugo darted out and dropped it to the ground with one swift swing of his shovel. Iggy and Sam scrambled after him.

“Where are you going,” shouted Iggy.

“Away from there.” He pointed up Candy Cane Way, where a large group of zombie elves had gathered. They were shuffling south towards Frostbite Road. Iggy, Yugo and Sam ran as fast as they could in the opposite direction, which given the geographic peculiarity of the North Pole, was also south. They reached the peppermint cobblestones of Santa Claus Lane, but that route was blocked by a dozen zombie maniacs or more. They decided to change direction, and ran south towards Mistletoe Landing.

By the time they reached the next corner, they were surrounded by zombies on all sides. Zombies to the left of them, and zombies to the right. Iggy, Yugo and Sam squeezed around a small mob, which then turned and shuffled after them. They picked up their pace. Some more zombies spilled out of the front door of the Egg Nog Lounge and joined the chase. One of them grabbed at Yugo, but he was able to send it spinning to the curb with a sweep of his shovel.

“We're completely surrounded,” shouted Iggy. He cracked one zombie over the head with his shovel and kicked at a second. He only struck a glancing blow, but Sam stepped up to finish the job with a vigorous kick “right in the Eskimo Pie,” as he would say later.

The crowd of zombies pressed in closer, grabbing and grasping at them. Yugo shook himself loose of one and pushed back at another. “We need to get off the street,” he said. He was backed into the front door of *The Walrus and Ulu*, the North Pole's most popular watering hole. The door sprung open and Yugo fell inside. Iggy and Sam followed him and then slammed the door shut behind them as a group of zombies crashed into it. They pounded on the door and howled for brains. Yugo barred the door shut with his shovel and took a few unsteady steps inside. He leaned against the big Lego walrus statue in the in the foyer and caught his breath.

“What are we going to do?” said Iggy. “They're all zombies. All of the elves are zombies.”

The pub echoed with the sounds of little chubby hands scraping and clawing at the doors and windows. The front doors bent inwards from the pressure of hundreds of little zombies outside.

“We're trapped,” said Sam, his face was grey. “Those doors won't hold up much longer.”

“We need something more than shovels,” said Yugo. He pulled a small black object from his pocket. He pressed a red button on the side and a thin wire antenna extended from the top. He pressed the button again and it emitted a faint high pitched “peep.” He slipped the little black remote control back into his pocket and stepped away from the walrus statue. “You might want to stand clear of the door,” he said.

There were several thumping noises and then a shiny red snowmobile crashed through the front door. It skidded sideways into the walrus statue, scattering millions of pieces Lego across the bar.

Yugo opened the front door of the snowmobile and settled in behind the wheel. This snowmobile was like no other snowmobile in the world. It had an indoor passenger compartment with room for at least three elves. It was powered by a lithium fusion nuclear reactor that could send it speeding through the deepest snow and, with the flip of a blue switch or the press of a flashing green button, flying through the deepest night on stubby silver wings. The onboard computer powered a dodecaphonic sound system, GPS navigation device and built in waffle maker.

“Come on you guys,” said Yugo. “Let's get out of here.”

Iggy leapt into the back set and fastened his seat belt. Sam turned the other way and walked to the bar. Sam was afraid of the snowmobile. Every time he got into it, something terrifying happened. He reached behind the bar and poured himself a tall pint of Chubby's Finest Elflägär and drank it in one long gulp.

A few zombies staggered into ruined entrance way of *The Walrus and Ulu*. They flinched and stumbled as they tried to walk over all of the little bits of Lego. Even zombies feel the pain of Lego underfoot.

The first one approached the bar and Sam smashed his empty pint mug over the zombie's head. He followed that with a swift kick to the turtle doves (as he later described it) and the zombie fell face first onto hundreds of pointy bits of Lego.

Sam set his broken glass on the bar, walked around the probe zombie and settled into the snowmobile. As much as he hated it, he hated elvish zombie maniacs even more.

Yugo pressed a yellow button and the doors slid closed on smooth hydraulics. He twisted an orange button and the snowmobile powered up with a frightening scream.

“Let's get out of here,” said Yugo. He shifted the snowmobile into gear. The wheels spun on the the Lego pieces and then the snowmobile shot out the front door and into the zombie horde. They grasped at the snowmobile, but it knocked them aside like so many Little Miss Henrietta™ dolls.

They bumped over three more zombies before Iggy said, “is it really necessary to run over our friends? This thing can fly, can't it?”

Yugo nodded, flipped a blue switch and then pressed a flashing green button. A pair of stubby silver wings extended from either side of the snowmobile. Yugo pulled back on the wheel and they rose gently into the air, leaving the North Pole and several thousand screeching and snatching zombie maniacs below. “Now we need a plan,” he said.

“How high can this thing go?” asked Sam. “I say we take off and nuke the entire North Pole from orbit. It's the only way to be sure.”²¹

“Sam! We can't nuke our friends! Or Santa Claus,” said Iggy.

“We can't anyway,” said Yugo. “This snowmobile doesn't have nukes.”

This statement was not entirely true. ‘Not entirely true’ as used here is another way of saying ‘completely false’. In fact, there were two tactical nuclear weapons on board the snowmobile, but Yugo was saving those for a rainy day and it was not raining at the North Pole that day.

It never rains at the North Pole. It snows almost every day, but there is never a rainy day at the North Pole.

Still, Yugo was not ready to try the nuclear option.

Yet.

THE OTHER COLI

YUGO GUIDED THE SNOWMOBILE AROUND the upper floors of the Santa Claus Tower and then turned south. They flew over the intersection of Santa Claus Lane and Candy Cane Way. It was usually crowded with traffic and busy elves at that time of day. Now, there was only a crowd of meandering zombies, searching for brains.

Sam surveyed the horror below. “It's hopeless. The whole North Pole has been overrun by zombies. Even Santa Claus is one of them. Christmas is finished. There'll be no saving it this time.”

Iggy looked Sam in his dark and sunken eyes. “There's always hope,” he said.

Sam just shook his head and stared out the window.

The snowmobile glided above the Tinsel Factory and the Reindeer Stables. Yugo banked right and slowly descended over the Elves Barracks. He flew down Frostbite Alley and then circled above the NPRDB. He engaged the retro rockets and dropped gently onto the chocolate mint shingles that covered the roof of the squat grey building.

“Why are we landing here?” asked Iggy.

Yugo turned a blue dial and the snowmobile slowly wound down. “Nedd said that this all began when they released the *horrible coli*. If we're going to put things right, we're going to need a better coli.”

²¹ Another homage: remember, it's not stealing if it's an homage.

Sam coughed. "But they're all awful."

"There's always hope," said Iggy.

"Exactly," said Yugo. "If germs started this thing, maybe we can find a germ that can end it." He reached a rooftop door and opened it carefully. You never can tell with zombies. The stairwell leading down into the ECDCC at the NPRDB was dark and utterly still. Yugo reached into his pocket and retrieved a long thin tube with a bulbous end. He pressed a button on the side and the end of the tube lit up, illuminating the staircase.

"That's a nice flashlight," said Iggy.

Yugo nodded. "Thanks."

"Not more stairs," said Sam. He wiped the sweat from his forehead, which felt clammy and cold. He felt like death. He took a tentative step and then stopped and grabbed Iggy's shoulder. "I can't go any further."

Iggy reached back and held Sam's arm. "It's not much further," he said.

Sam coughed. "You don't understand. I can't go with you any further. You have to put me down."

"What are you talking about?" asked Yugo.

Sam tugged at his collar, revealing a festering red sore. "Santa bit me. I'm one of the walking evil living dead now."

Iggy blinked and then he blinked again. "Oh, Sam. We're almost there. We're going to find a better coli."

"There are plenty of coli in the labs. We'll have you fixed up in no time," said Yugo.

"It's too late for me," said Sam. He squeezed his eyes shut and softly growled "braaaaiinnssss..."

Iggy pleaded. "Stop it Sam. You're going to be fine."

Yugo shook his head. "I don't think so, Iggy. Sam has the zombie mania."

"I don't have a shovel," said Iggy.

"Kick me then," said Sam. "Kick me as hard as you can in the nutcracker sweets."

"I think that's pronounced 'suites'," said Yugo.

"Whatever," said Sam. He tilted his blue grey face, lurched forward and stammered, "b-brains ..."

So Iggy let him have it. He did not want to, but he did it anyway. Right in the nutcracker sweets. Or suites, as Yugo would later describe it.

Sam clutched his groin, then tipped over slowly and fell to the floor. "Come on, Iggy," said Yugo. "He'll be up again in no time hungering for brains. And if I

know Sam, that will be one powerful hunger.” Yugo knew better than most of Sam’s prodigious appetite. If Sam were ever to feast on brains the way he feasted on sausages, the North Pole was done for. He stepped forward and gave Sam another firm kick to the gingerbread men, just to be sure. You never can tell with zombies.

They turned away from Sam’s rotund and soon to be reanimated corpse and slipped quickly down the rest of the stairs. They stepped out into the hall and headed for the labs.

“It doesn’t feel right to leave Sam behind,” said Iggy.

“I know. He knows a lot about zombies and he’s good in a fight,” said Yugo.

“That’s not what I meant,” said Iggy. “He’s our friend.” That said, even Iggy had to recognize that Sam, armed with a shovel and a pair of sturdy boots, was very good in a zombie fight.

Yugo paused and then nodded. “Yes, that too. He could swing a shovel with the best of them.”

They reached Nedd’s lab and opened the door with

Neddger Shakespeare, Ph.D.
Scholar, Scientist, Hand Model

painted on the glazed glass window.

Yugo strode briskly to Nedd’s desk at the end of the lab. He flipped on the computer and tapped on the keyboard. It took him two or three tries to log in; Nedd’s password was “3ggn0g”, which was a fairly common password for elves at the North Pole.²²

Iggy leaned over Yugo’s shoulder as he scrolled through screen after screen of technical data. “Have you found anything?”

“Just that Nedd likes to shop at *www.friendlyelves.com*,” said Yugo.

Iggy shrugged. It was a very popular website among elves. “Have you found a better *coli*?” he asked.

Yugo scrolled down the screen. “There are quite a few *colis* listed here. There’s the *average coli*, but that’s not good enough. The *bad coli*. That can’t be good. The *common coli*. Far too common for our needs. The *d*, *e* and *f coli* are just awful.”

“What about the *g coli*?” asked Iggy. “That must be a *good coli*.”

“It’s not good at all,” said Yugo. “That stuff will make your face peel off.”

Iggy touched his cheek. As optimistic as he was, he could not imagine any way that having his face peel off would be a good thing. “What’s next?”

²² Other common passwords used at the North Pole include “password”, “candycane”, and “shirley”. Shirley is an elf who gets around a bit.

Yugo clicked the mouse. “The *horrible coli*, of course. We’ve seen what that does.”

“That’s not good. What’s next?”

“The *invisible coli*. I can’t see anything here about it.”

“There must be a better *coli* in there somewhere.”

Yugo clicked again. His eyes brightened and he said, “hello.”

“What is it?” asked Iggy.

“This might be just what we need,” said Yugo. “The *j coli*. Also known as the *jolly coli*.”

“That sounds like the best *coli* we could hope for,” said Iggy.

“It’s very experimental. It hasn’t even been approved for animal tests. But Nedd’s notes say that the symptoms of exposure to *j coli* include rosy cheeks, twinkly eyes and dimples, how merry.”

“That’s perfect!” said Iggy.

Yugo shook his head. “It’s never been tested properly. Who knows what might happen. There could be side effects.”

“How could it be worse than turning elves into zombies?” asked Iggy. “We have to try it.”

“You’re right.” Yugo turned from the computer and scanned the shelves for the *jolly coli*. He found a small bottle at the end of the shelf, with the letter *J* written on the label in Nedd’s scabbly hand. Yugo grabbed the bottle and spun off the lid. The smell of fresh baked gingerbread filled the lab. “Now we need to find a test subject.”

There was a growl from the doorway. Iggy and Yugo turned and saw Zombie Sam shuffle into the lab. He looked much worse than he had when they left him in a crumpled heap in the stairwell. His face was gaunt and grey and a worm gnawed on one cheek. He was much slimmer than before, his stained red tunic hung limply over his bony, broken frame. He lurched into the lab and reached for them with a thin arm.

“I think we found our test subject,” said Iggy.

Zombie Sam lunged at Yugo, who had only a moment to spatter a few drops of the *j coli* in his face before Zombie Sam grabbed him. He recoiled, then grunted and reached for Yugo again.

But this time his arm did not seem quite so bony and his complexion was not nearly so grey. In fact, he was not grey at all. His skin was as pink as cherry ice cream.

“It’s working!” shouted Iggy. “You’ve cured him!”

Sam turned to Iggy and growled “brains,” before he snatched at him.

Yugo splashed a few more drops of the *j coli* on Sam. His complexion improved, but his attitude did not. He still hungered for brains and Iggy's brains in particular.

"He's not very jolly at all," said Iggy. He took a few quick steps backward to get out of Sam's reach.

Yugo leapt onto Sam's back and poured out the rest of bottle of *j coli*. Sam dropped to his knees and started sneezing. Then he giggled and rose shakily to his feet. There was no sign of the zombie mania. Sam was pink and plump again, a right jolly old elf. "Thanks Yugo. I feel a lot better now," he said.

"He is cured!" said Iggy. "He just needed a bigger dose. We're going to need a whole lot more of that *coli* to cure the rest of the elves. And Santa Claus."

Yugo set the empty jar on the lab bench. "That was all the *jolly coli* we had. There isn't any more."

Iggy slumped onto one of the lab chairs. "There must be some way."

Sam sneezed again. Yugo wiped his cheek and glared at him.

"Sorry," said Sam. "I can't seem to stop sneezing."

Yugo giggled a little "ho ho ho".

"What are you laughing about?" asked Iggy. He glared at Yugo. "And why are your eyes so twinkly?"

Yugo looked down at his hand, which was as pink as cherry ice cream. "Do that again, Sam," he said. "Sneeze on me."

Sam shrugged and launched a wet sneeze at Yugo.

Iggy wrinkled his pointed nose. "Now you guys are just being gross."

Yugo wiped the goo from his face. His eyes were twinkling even more merrily than before. He laughed again, a full throated and boisterous "ho ho ho."

"You sure look jolly for someone who's just been sneezed on," said Sam. He sneezed again, with even more explosive snotty wetness this time. But Yugo's cheeks just got rosier than before.

"What's happening?" asked Iggy.

"Don't you see," said Yugo, grabbing Sam by the shoulders. "I think I have a case of the jollies. The side effect of the *j coli* is that it's extremely contagious. Sam's infected with it and he infected me with it when he sneezed on me."

"Can he infect the other elves like he did to you?" asked Iggy.

"Of course," said Yugo. "All he has to do is sneeze on them."

"That's just gross," said Iggy.

THE CONTAGIOUS ELVES

YUGO ROLLED DOWN THE PASSENGER WINDOW as the snowmobile lifted off from the roof of the NPRDB building. A chilly Arctic wind blew through the open window. Yugo guided the snowmobile out over Candy Cane Lane. There were zombie elves shambling about in random clusters below them. “Okay Sam, start sneezing,” said Yugo.

“Do you really think that will work?” asked Iggy.

Yugo nodded. “The *jolly coli* works differently than the *horrible* one. You need to get bitten to get the zombie mania and it takes a while before it begins. The *jolly coli* is transmitted through the air, and the incubation period is only a few moments. It’s a much more virulent *coli*.”

“But sneezing? From all the way up here?”

“You’d be surprised how far a sneeze can travel,” said Yugo.²³

Sam leaned out of the window into the biting cold and sneezed as hard as he could. Tiny drops of snot danced in the night sky like stars, each one infused with millions of *jolly coli* molecules. They formed an infectious cloud that fell softly onto the crowded streets below. Soon, the cries of “brains,” were replaced by fits of laughter alternating with fits of sneezing.

Iggy’s face brightened up. “I think it’s working.”

“Of course,” said Yugo. “And once those zombies get the jollies, they’ll start spreading it to other zombies.”

“There’s still one other thing we have to take care of,” said Iggy.

“That’s right,” said Yugo. “The biggest zombie of them all.”

Yugo turned north, and flew straight to the base of the Santa Claus Tower. They scrambled out of the snowmobile and ran up the front steps as swiftly as Sam’s facility with stairs would let them. Zombie Nutmeg was still there, guarding the front door. One of her big brown eyes hung loosely from its socket. She sneered at the elves as they approached and shuffled towards them. Iggy and Yugo used Sam like a shield, turning him to face Nutmeg while Yugo shouted, “sneeze Sam, sneeze!”

Sam did as he was ordered, drenching Nutmeg in a cloud of mucousy wetness before she could reach him. The effect of the *j coli* was almost immediate. The *jolly coli* was proving to be a much more powerful *coli* than the *horrible* one.

²³ A typical human sneeze produces 40,000 tiny droplets of spit and germs that rocket out of the body at speeds greater than 200 miles per hour. Elf sneezes are even worse.

Nutmeg gave her limp head a shake and then began blinking her big brown eyes. They twinkled like a frosty winter morning. She giggled and then said, “hey Sam, what are you doing later? Did you still want to get that hot chockey later?”

“He’s busy right now,” said Iggy.

“Can’t talk,” added Yugo. “We’ve got Christmas to save.”

He pushed Sam up the rest of the stairs. As they reached the rotating doors at the front of the building Sam turned and shouted back to Nutmeg, “call me!” Nutmeg smiled and then dashed through the snow, sneezing all the way.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam walked into the lobby of the Santa Claus Tower. It was still dark, but they could hear something crashing beyond the security desk. The elves moved forward carefully.

Unfortunately, the big red figure that stepped out from behind the security desk was not moving carefully at all. Santa Claus barely recognizable anymore. His belly, usually round and shaking like a bowl full of jelly, was sunken. His frosty white beard, what was left of it, was streaked with black gore. There were no twinkling eyes or merry dimples. His eyes were yellow and bulged crazily from his grey pockmarked face. The zombie mania had taken him completely.

Zombie Santa stumbled towards Iggy, Yugo and Sam. He reached out his arms and growled. “Brrraa-iins.”

Iggy urged Sam forward. “All right Sam, get ready.”

“He’s a big man and he looks pretty far gone,” said Yugo. “It might take a few sneezes to work.”

Sam gulped and stepped into the shrinking space between his friends and Zombie Santa. He crinkled his nose and got ready to sneeze.

And nothing happened. He tried tickling his nose, but still no sneeze came out. He turned back to Iggy and Yugo pleadingly. “I think I’m all sneezed out.”

“I’m pretty sure I have some pepper on me. That might help.” Iggy dug into his pocket, pulled out a fistful of black pepper and threw it in Sam’s face.

Sam gasped and clenched his eyes. His face was red and his eyes were burning. Tears ran down his cheeks. He took a deep breath and tried to sneeze again. But still nothing came out.

“Let me see what I’ve got,” said Yugo. He pulled a handful of yellow powder from his pocket. “Pollen,” he said. He threw a yellow cloud at Sam.

Sam dropped to his knees and choked. Water ran from his eyes and nose, but he still did not sneeze.

“How about this?” said Iggy. He drew his hand from his other pocket and threw a clump of cat hair at Sam. It stuck to Sam’s wet cheeks, but there was no sneeze.

“Sneezing powder?” said Yugo. He tossed a small pile of sparkling dust at Sam.

“Why are you guys carrying all that stuff?” gasped Sam. He rolled onto the floor, struggling for breath. “I mean it Yugo, I’ve got nothing. I’m sneezed out.”

Zombie Santa bent over Sam and Iggy had to pull him back from the zombie’s graveyard grasp. He looked up at Iggy and the reached for him.

That was when Iggy sneezed. Maybe it was all the pepper and cat hair in the air, maybe it was the sneezing powder, but Iggy launched a big damp sneeze that sprayed all over the front of Zombie Santa.

The big red suited zombie took a step back. Iggy sneezed again.

“That’s it, Iggy, keep it up,” said Yugo. Then he sneezed, too.

“What’s happening?” asked Iggy.

“It’s the *jolly coli*. With all the sneezing that’s been going on, we’ve caught it to. We’re infected just like Sam and Nutmeg were.” Yugo sneezed again.

Zombie Santa staggered backwards as Iggy and Yugo marched up to him, sneezing with each step. Zombie Santa fell down, covered in sticky mucus and spit.

“Ho ho ho,” he said softly.

Iggy sneezed again.

“I think you can stop that now,” said Santa Claus, who climbed slowly to his feet. His beard was whole and white as the new fallen snow again. His cheeks were merrily dimpled and had their old rosy glow. And his belly, well it shook when he laughed. Like a bowlful of jelly.

“Ho ho ho,” laughed Santa Claus, much louder than before. He clapped Iggy on the back and then laughed some more. Iggy just sneezed.

THE HAPPY ENDING

IT IS SAID THAT LAUGHTER IS THE BEST MEDICINE. This is not true if you are suffering from the pain of a sucking chest wound. There are better medicines than laughter for that condition. It is also said that laughter is contagious, and this is so. The laughter of one person can make a whole room begin to laugh, even if there was really nothing to laugh about in the first place (like the pain of a sucking chest wound, for example). It is finally said that when you laugh, the whole world laughs with you. That one is surely an exaggeration at best.

In the end, it was not the jolly coli or a sneeze that saved Christmas. It was laughter. To be sure, the *jolly coli* had something to do with it, but really all that did was make the elves laugh (and sneeze). And nobody who is laughing (and sneezing) can be much of a zombie.

The laughter from the *jolly coli* spread across the North Pole, with each elf spreading it to the next until there were no more zombies to be found.

Santa Claus decreed that no matter what children asked for in their Christmas letters, none of them were getting a *Zombie Maniac™* doll that Christmas, or any other for that matter. Foam rubber dart guns were another matter entirely, and the elves were forced to pull double shifts to make enough of them to fill Santa's list.

And so, Christmas came as it always does. Santa Claus made his rounds, as he always does and the late hours of Christmas Day found a happy group of elves celebrating at the *Walrus and Ulu*, as they always did.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam were there, at their usual table between the bar and the men's room. Iggy had a frosted glass of Arctic glacier water, Yugo sipped on a chocolate buttermilk and Sam was down to the bottom of his third pint of Chubby's Finest Elfläger. Nutmeg sat beside him, nursing a double hot chockey with extra marshmallows. She had decided to be Sam's occasional girlfriend again.

A small group of elves were working on putting the big Lego walrus back together. It was a big job, but elves are good at making things, particularly out of Lego.

Jimmy and the Penguins were playing "My Name is Blitzen"²⁴ on the little stage at the back of the room. The elves at the closest tables were singing along and waving their outstretched arms in time to the music. It was every bit a holly, jolly Christmas.

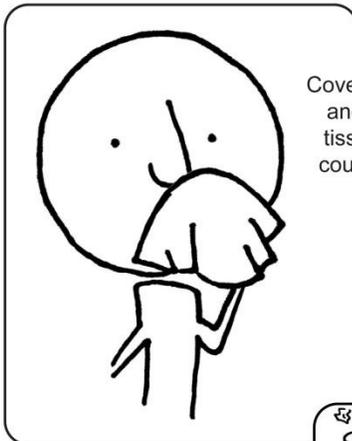
And then Nedd, who had finally escaped from his hiding place in the janitor's room in Elves Barracks B, burst through the front door, drooling and shouting about brains and biting everything in sight ...

²⁴ What a great tune. Seriously.

Hey kids, despite what you just read, it is not cool to sneeze on your friends. As Iggy says, that's just gross. You can make your friends all damp and snotty and they could get really sick. So remember, always cover your sneeze!

Stop the spread of germs that make you and others sick!

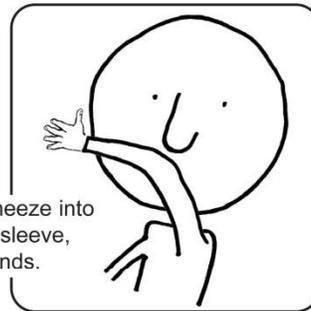
Cover your Cough



Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze

or

cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve, not your hands.



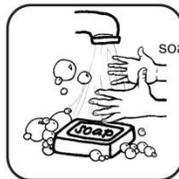
Put your used tissue in the waste basket.



You may be asked to put on a surgical mask to protect others.

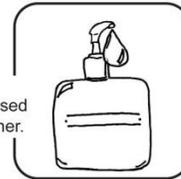
Clean your Hands

after coughing or sneezing.



Wash with soap and water

or clean with alcohol-based hand cleaner.



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Iggy, Yugo and Sam Will Return In:

To Kill a Partridge

or

There's Something About Larry

or

The 10th Reindeer

or

Dances With Polar Bears

Or

The Elf Who Knew Too Much

or

Something Else Entirely



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