

Northwick RIDES AGAIN

It was the one night of the year when time stood still for most of the world, but for one person was never slow enough. There was never enough of it to do everything that needed doing. Father Christmas cleaned his glasses, stood up, stretched, adjusted the straps of his braces, grumbled and sighed his way into his big, red jacket. He looked out of the four-pane window dusted with snow and saw that darkness had fallen. It was time to set off. He opened the door to the garage where the sleigh gleamed and the four reindeer stamped their hooves ready for the busy night ahead.

Father Christmas checked the bulging bags of presents were stowed safely before clambering up into his seat, strapping himself in and removing the crook lock from the steering reins. There was no danger of the sleigh being stolen in his snowy northern home, but, truth to tell, Father Christmas liked to slip in a present to himself from time to time. He switched on the onboard computer and pressed the button to open the garage door. Not for him the traditional Christmas presents of socks and cigars. Oh no, he was definitely smitten by toys of a more technical nature.

The four reindeer sighed as Father Christmas ran the computer through the endless series of pre-flight checks, muttering strange spells to himself — “hatches, harness, headsets, hydraulics” — as he did so, before at last uttering the only spell that really worked. With a cry of “Giddy-Up!” they were off and had soon reached their cruising speed of several million stockings an hour at a height a little above the average chimney.

One for the road

It was well past midnight when Rudolf, the oldest and wisest reindeer, noticed that this most special night of the year was beginning to work its usual magic on his boss. If Father Christmas had one weakness, apart from

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being a little grumpy now and again, and of course his liking for gadgets, and perhaps being a little overweight, it was his habit. His habit, that is, of entering into the spirit of Christmas with a little too much enthusiasm. To put it bluntly, Father Christmas was very fond of the sherry left out for him by children all over the world.

He saw it as his duty to drink every drop. After all, he would tell Rudolf, it would be rude to turn down such hospitality. The reindeer could set his antlers by the habit. Just when they began to turn blue with cold at the very tips, that was when Father Christmas would start to nod off at the reins.

This was not a problem, as Rudolf and his companions were in complete control of the sleigh. However, they did need someone a little smaller than a reindeer to scramble down the chimneys and read out the names and addresses on the long list tucked behind the dashboard. Father Christmas

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had, of course, put the list on computer. He said it was more efficient. But Rudolf insisted they take a carefully hand-written copy "just in case".

A helping paw

Northwick lay awake listening to the sounds of scrabbling and scratching on the roof. It was pitch dark even after he had put his spectacles on so he knew it must be very late. Gradually, as his eyes and ears got used to the dark, he made out a large blob lying on the floor at the foot of Frank's bed. He was wondering what he should do when the blob hiccupped and groaned. "Can I be of any assistance?" asked Northwick, trying very hard not to sound afraid.

"Oh, thank goodness, a Sensible Bear!" came a voice, from, of all places, down the chimney. Northwick got out of bed, walked carefully around the blob, put his head up the chimney and asked, "Who's that?"

Rudolf, who was at the top of the chimney, introduced himself to Northwick, said he was sorry for any disturbance, but could the Bear possibly lend them a helping paw? He gave Northwick a hoof up the chimney and explained that it was, in fact, Father Christmas who was fast asleep on Frank's bedroom floor.

As Northwick stood on the roof, dusting the soot off his fur, he thought he saw four fine reindeer and a sleigh loaded with presents perched precariously next to the chimney. He pinched himself, closed his eyes, opened them again, only to find the scene exactly as before. "We're in a bit of a pickle and could do with your help. Can you read?" asked Rudolf quickly.

"Of course, I can read, but I can't see very far," replied Northwick, doing his best to pretend that he often talked to reindeers on rooftops in the middle of the night.

"That's all right. We'll take care of the driving," said Rudolf. "Jump in, put that seat-belt on and read out the next name and address on that list." For some reason Northwick could never explain afterwards, he did just as the reindeer said. Seconds later they were speeding above rooftops so fast that the sleigh's go-faster stripes had to hurry to catch up.

Northwick soon lost count of the number of chimneys he climbed up

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and down with great sacks of presents on his back. The strange thing was he didn't feel at all tired. In fact, once he got used to the sleigh whizzing across the rooftops, he really enjoyed it. Not until they arrived back at his own house did he notice his eyelids drooping and his ears folding down at the corners.



As the sleigh skidded to a halt, he was vaguely aware of Father Christmas dragging himself out of the chimney-pot, groaning "Oh! Oh! Oh! We'll be late!" Rudolf thanked Northwick for his help, but by this time the Bear was already stumbling past Father Christmas and back down the chimney to his bed.

It seemed like only moments later that Frank was jumping on Northwick's duvet, ripping open present after present until Northwick could no longer see the bedroom floor for wrapping paper and new toys. The Bear yawned, struggled out of his bed and was about to tell Frank about the dream he had had, but stopped. Had it been a dream, he thought to himself? Or had he really been on Santa's sleigh, up and down chimneys, delivering presents?

He was still thinking about this when Frank pushed a large box into his paws. "It's for you! It's for you! Go on, open it! Open it now!" the little boy said. Northwick slowly took the wrapping paper off. Inside was the largest jar of honey he had ever seen. And, all around the jar were pictures of Father Christmas's sleigh, pulled by four reindeer, with a bespectacled bear sitting in the driving seat.

This story first appeared in the winter 1998 issue (41) of the Nystagmus Network's Focus newsletter. It is one of the stories in the book and audio CD "Tales of Northwick" and was also published by Moorvision, a charity supporting visually impaired children in Devon, in its summer 2011 newsletter.