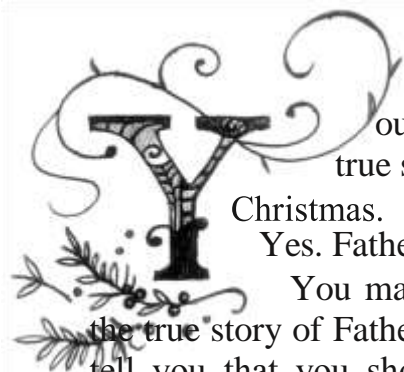


An Ordinary Boy



You are about to read the true story of Father

Christmas.

Yes. Father Christmas.

You may wonder how I know the true story of Father Christmas, and I will tell you that you shouldn't really question such things. Not right at the start of a book. It's rude, for one thing. All you need to understand is that I do know the story of Father Christmas, or else why would I be writing it?

Maybe you don't call him Father Christmas.

Maybe you call him something else.

Santa or Saint Nick or Santa Claus or Sinterklaas or Kris Kringle or Pelznickel or Papa Noël or Strange Man With A Big Belly Who Talks To Reindeer And Gives Me Presents. Or maybe you have a name you've come up with yourself, just for fun. If you were an elf, though, you would always call him Father Christmas. It was the pixies who

started calling him Santa Claus, and spread the word, just to confuse things, in their mischievous way.

But whatever you happen to call him, you know about him, and that's the main thing.

Can you believe there was a time when no one knew about him? A time when he was just an ordinary boy called Nikolas, living in the middle of nowhere, or the middle of Finland, doing nothing with magic except believing in it? A boy who knew very little about the world except the taste of mushroom soup, the feel of a cold north wind, and the stories he was told. And who only had a doll made out of a turnip to play with.

But life was going to change for Nikolas, in ways he could never have imagined. Things were going to happen to him.

Good things.

Bad things.

Impossible things.

But if you are one of those people who believe that some things are impossible, you should put this book down right away. It is most certainly not for you.

Because this book is full of *impossible*
things.



Are you still reading the book?

Good. (Elves would be proud.) Then let
us begin . . .

A Woodcutter's Son



ow, Nikolas was a happy boy.

Well, actually, no.

He would have told you he was happy, if you asked him, and he certainly *tried* to be happy, but sometimes being happy is quite tricky. I suppose, what I am saying is

that Nikolas was a boy who believed in happiness, the way he believed in elves and trolls and pixies, but he had never actually seen an elf or a troll or a pixie, and he hadn't really seen proper happiness either. At least, not for a very long time. He didn't have it that easy. Take Christmas.

This is the list of every present Nikolas had received for Christmas. In his entire life.

1. A wooden sleigh.

2. A doll carved out of a turnip.

That's it.

The truth is that Nikolas's life was hard. But he made the best of it.

He had no brothers or sisters to play with, and the nearest town – Kristiinankaupunki (Kris-tee-nan-cow-punky) – was a long way away. It took even longer to get to than it did to pronounce. And anyway there wasn't much to do in Kristiinankaupunki except go to church or look in the window of the toyshop.

'Papa! Look! A wooden reindeer!' Nikolas would gasp as he pressed his nose against the glass of that toyshop.

Or,

'Look! An elf doll!'

Or,

'Look! A cuddly doll of the king!'

And once he even asked,

'Can I have one?'

He looked up at his father's face. A long and thin face with thick bushy eyebrows and skin rougher than old shoes in the rain.

‘Do you know how much it is?’ said Joel, his father.

‘No,’ said Nikolas.

And then his father held up his left hand, fingers stretched. He only had four and a half fingers on his left hand because of an accident with an axe. A horrible accident. Lots of blood. And we probably shouldn’t dwell on it too much, as this is a Christmas story.





‘Four and a half rubles?’

His father looked cross. ‘No. *No*. Five. Five rubles. And five rubles for an elf doll is too much money. You could buy a cottage for that.’

‘I thought cottages cost one hundred
rubles,
Papa?’

‘Don’t try and be clever, Nikolas.’

‘I thought you said I should try and be clever.’

‘Not right now,’ said his father. ‘And anyway, why would you need an elf doll when you have that turnip-doll your mother made? Couldn’t you pretend the turnip is an elf?’

‘Yes, Papa, of course,’ Nikolas said, because he didn’t want to make his father upset.

‘Don’t worry, son. I’ll work so hard that one day I’ll be rich and you can have all the toys you want and we can have a *real* horse, with our own coach, and ride into town like a king and a prince!’

‘Don’t work too hard, Papa,’ said Nikolas. ‘You need to play sometimes

too. And I *am* happy with my turnip-doll.’

But his father had to work hard.
Chopping wood all day and every day.
He worked as soon as it was light to
when it was dark.

‘The trouble is we live in Finland,’ his father explained, on the day our story starts.

‘Doesn’t everyone live in Finland?’ asked Nikolas.

It was morning. They were heading out into the forest, passing the old stone well that they could never look at. The ground was dusted with a thin layer of snow. Joel had an axe on his back.

The blade dazzled in the cold morning sun.



‘No,’ said Joel. ‘Some people live in Sweden. And there are about seven people who live in Norway. Maybe even eight. The world is a big place.’

‘So what is the problem with living in Finland, Papa?’

‘Trees.’

‘Trees? I thought you liked trees. That’s why you chop them down.’

‘But there are trees everywhere. So no one pays much for . . .’ Joel stopped. Turned around.

‘What is it, Papa?’

‘I thought I heard something.’ They saw nothing but birch and pine trees and shrubs of herbs and heather. A tiny red-breasted bird sat on a branch.

‘Must have been nothing,’ Joel said,
unsure.

Joel stared up at a giant pine, pressed his hand on the rough bark. ‘This is the one.’ He began chopping, and Nikolas began his search for mushrooms and berries.

Nikolas only had a single mushroom in his basket when he caught a glimpse of an animal in the distance. Nikolas loved animals, but mainly saw only birds, mice and rabbits.

Sometimes he would see a moose.

But this was something bigger and stronger.

A bear. A giant brown bear, about three times the size of Nikolas, standing on its hind legs, its huge paws scooping berries into its mouth. Nikolas’s heart

started a drum roll with excitement. He decided to get a closer look.

He walked quietly forward. He was quite close now.

I know that bear!

The terrifying moment when he realised he recognised the bear was also the one where he stepped on a twig and it cracked. The bear turned, stared straight at him.

Nikolas felt something grab his arm, hard. He turned to see his father looking crossly down at him.

‘What are you doing?’ he hissed. ‘You’ll get yourself killed.’

His dad’s grip was so tight it hurt. But then he let go.

‘Be the forest,’ whispered Joel. This was something he always said, whenever danger was around. Nikolas never knew what it meant. He just stayed still. But it was too late.

Nikolas remembered when he was six years old with his mother – his jolly, singing, rosycheeked mother. They had been going to get some water from the

well when they'd seen the exact same bear. His mother had told Nikolas to run back to the cottage, and Nikolas had run. She hadn't.

Nikolas watched his father hold his axe with a stronger grip, but he saw his father's hands tremble. He pulled Nikolas back, behind him, in case the bear charged.

'Run,' his father said.

'No. I'm staying with you.'

It was unclear if the bear was going to chase them. It probably wasn't. It was probably too old and tired. But it did roar at them.

Then, right at that moment, there was a whistling sound. Nikolas felt something brush against his ear, like a fast feather. A moment later, a grey-feathered arrow pierced the tree beside the bear's head. The bear went down on all fours, and sloped away.

Nikolas and Joel looked behind them, trying to see who had fired the arrow, but there was nothing but pine trees.

'It must be the hunter,' said Joel.

A week before, they had found an injured moose with the same grey-feathered arrow sticking out of it. Nikolas had made his father help the poor creature. He'd watched him gather snow and press it around the wound before pulling the arrow out.

They kept staring through the trees. A twig cracked, but they didn't see anything.

'All right, Christmas, let's go,' Joel said.

Nikolas hadn't been called that for a long time.

Back in the old days his father used to joke about and have fun. He used to call everyone nicknames. Nikolas's mother was 'Sweetbread' even though her real name was Lilja, and Nikolas himself was nicknamed 'Christmas' because he had been born on Christmas Day. His father had even engraved his wooden sleigh with the nickname.

'Look at him, Sweetbread, our little boy Christmas.'

He was hardly ever called that now.

'But don't ever go spying on bears, okay? You'll get yourself killed. Stay near me. You're still clearly a boy.'

A little later, after Joel had been chopping for an hour, he sat down on a tree stump.

'I could help you,' offered Nikolas.

His father held up his left hand. 'This is what happens when eleven-year-olds use axes.'

So Nikolas just kept his eyes to the ground,

looking for mushrooms, and wondered if being eleven years old was ever going to be any fun.

