

**HAL
SANTA!**

JOHN MCNEE

For anyone who was ever on the 'Naughty List'.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

St. Nicholas—a small town in northern Canada

Saint Nicholas—something else

I.

ON THE MORNING of the 23rd, knowing he was expected at the elementary school at noon, Father McHattie limited himself to only two beers with breakfast. On an average weekday, it was hard to find an excuse not to throw back a shot or two of hard liquor by mid-morning. Around the festive season it became something more like a necessity. A regular medicinal measure of Crown Royal was required at the start of the day and every hour hence to make it through the cavalcade of speeches, ceremonies, functions and frivolities foisted on him by the town. He was careful with it, prescribing himself just enough to lift his mood and numb the agony of existence without turning him into a belligerent, stumbling, vomiting inebriate. He always stayed on the right side of the line. With the children, however, he felt it important to maintain a certain edge. A brighter sparkle in his eye. A shinier sharpness to his diction. He owed them that much. After all, he had quite a story to tell and they, unlike the few poor wretches who still attended his sermons, could actually be expected to listen. So he drank a beer while waiting for the coffee to percolate, then ate some toast and a couple of stale doughnuts left over from a meeting with the new town refurbishment committee, followed by one more beer and that was all. And he found he didn't even miss the liquor until he was walking across town, navigating fresh snow piled high as his waist in places where it hadn't been cleared. He missed the whiskey's warmth then. But it was only a short walk to the school.

The teacher who greeted him in the foyer was new. A pretty young thing she was, like all the recent newcomers. The priest suspected this was down to the Bingzhen corporation's hiring policies—in culture if not explicitly stated in its contracts—and he wondered how many of the other townsfolk had noticed. With the

HAIL SANTA!

arrival of each new employee, their community grew a little more attractive. And anyone old, fat, or downright ugly could, at a glance, reliably be judged to have been a resident since before the town fell into the hands of private enterprise.

This interloper had red hair, long legs, and a charming accent the Reverend made no effort to place. She spoke quickly, telling him how delighted she was to meet him and how excited the children were about his visit—both statements he doubted in the extreme. Leading him to the classroom, she asked if it would be all right if she ducked out for ten minutes to prepare lunches for the children and he said certainly it would, explaining he had taught Sunday school lessons for over thirty years and anyway, there wasn't a child in her class he hadn't known all their lives.

They were a ragtag bunch, the pupils of St. Nicholas Elementary. There were fewer than twenty of them; the youngest seven years old and the eldest just turned twelve. Anyone younger was typically schooled at home, while anyone older attended secondary school at MacArthur Point, some 400 miles east, typically through a mix of boarding and online learning. Despite his assurances to their teacher, McHattie knew only a few of the children by sight—and fewer still from his Sunday school classes—but he bid them hello as though they were all old friends and they echoed the greeting with a similar level of warmth.

Taking a seat on a red plastic chair beside her desk, Father McHattie showed the teacher a wide smile full of yellow teeth and told her, "I think we're going to be just fine, dear."

She nodded, a nervous scratch of her arm betraying her slight hesitation, then stepped out, shutting the door behind her and disappearing down the hall toward the canteen.

Sucking air in through his nostrils and puffing up his chest the way he would at the pulpit, the Reverend surveyed his audience, their cherubic faces blank, their bright eyes fixed in anticipation. "Well now, children. I think you all know me."

"You spoke to us last year," said one of the boys.

"That's right, I did. And the year before that and the year before that, going all the way back to when I came to this town as an interim priest, filling in for the late Father McCarthy. I thought I would be here a few months, a year at most. But for nearly four decades now, I've been coming here on the last day of school before Christmas to tell a story. Usually, I'll tell the story of the Nativity

JOHN MCNEE

or I'll tell the story of Saint Nicholas of Myra, the original Santa Claus."

At mention of this name, a few heads perked up, as the priest had expected them to.

"But today . . ." He licked his dry lips. "Today I think I'd like to tell you a different story. A story that's not often told aloud, but passed down through families from one generation to the next. I don't suppose, with the way things are going, there are too many people left around these parts who know it—or, soon enough, anyone who'll care. But that's why it's important for me to tell it to you, so it will at least be known by the last children of St. Nicholas. It's the story of how this town got its name and it focuses on the town founder, a man by the name of Boyd McCulloch. Are there any McCullochs present?"

One of the youngsters raised his hand—the same boy who'd spoken before. He might have been the eldest in the class—lanky and heavily freckled—but his bowl-shaped haircut and primary-colored clothing, decorated with cartoon characters, made him appear juvenile.

"What's your name, son?" the priest asked.

"Devon," he answered.

"Well Devon, your ancestor Boyd McCulloch was a homesteader, lay preacher, and prospector who, more than a hundred years ago, bought a parcel of land stretching from the foothills of Mount Coldwell all the way down to the Carrick River, hoping it might yield a fortune of a kind he couldn't guess. In the meantime, he settled here with his wife and six children and raised hogs and planted an orchard. And he called the land Applecross. And come Christmas time, he would travel out across the hills to visit farms and towns in the valleys beyond to spread good cheer and tell stories of the festive season, much as I'm doing today. And he took with him baubles and trinkets and toys he had fashioned, which he would share among the children, along with cups of cider and strips of smoked pork. And in his breast pocket he carried a handwritten copy of the popular poem 'A Visit from St. Nicholas', better known to you, probably, as 'The Night Before Christmas', and a cartoon etching of Santa Claus which he would have the children pass among themselves while he read aloud the verse.

"And it so happened that in the Year of our Lord 1877 he ventured out to make just such a trip, hoping to spread some

HAIL SANTA!

Christian cheer when, crossing the hills, he was caught in a blizzard as sudden and terrible as the one that struck here last night. It was a maelstrom so fierce that it drove the huskies to panic and, in the confusion, McCulloch was thrown from his sled. He walked blindly, helplessly, through a wall of white until, apparently by the grace of God, he staggered into the shelter of the woodlands on the southern slope of Mount Coldwell. Now, you kids may be young, but I'm sure your parents and teachers have taught you well enough to know that if you find yourself lost and alone in the bitter cold, the very last thing you ought do is fall asleep. But poor Boyd McCulloch, after hours of stumbling through the trees in search of some sanctuary, succumbed to exhaustion and collapsed on the ground, falling immediately into unconsciousness.

"Yet when he awoke, he found himself in a soft, padded cot in a warm, candlelit room, being tended to by a large, shadowy figure. Bleary-eyed, McCulloch blinked up at the shape before him, but no matter how he strained, the image would not resolve itself into a form and countenance of which he could make sense. Yet seeing that his girth nearly filled the room and he was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot, McCulloch, still brain-sick from his ordeal in the snow, said to the man—if man he was—he said, 'Can you be Saint Nicholas?' And his savior replied, in a soft, deep voice, 'That is my name, if you say it is so.' McCulloch blinked again, straining once more to see through the low light, and through steaming tears of debilitation and disorientation, he saw, taking shape before him, the visage of a rosy-cheeked old man with a bushy white beard, a pipe 'twixt his teeth, and bells on his collar. And McCulloch proclaimed, 'It is you! You are he! You are Saint Nicholas!' To which the fat fellow gave a wink of his twinkling eye and replied, 'Yes indeed, good sir. As you say.'"

McHattie paused now, casting an eye around the room to check all were still listening. It was easy to lose youngsters these days in the telling of a tale. They had no attention span for it, too easily distracted by whatever fantastical thoughts lit up their heads. Yet all before him now appeared focused and attentive, urging in their own quiet way—with twitching brows and nibbled lips—for him to continue.

"So for two nights Boyd McCulloch was nursed by his savior, fed broth and mulled wine and soothed with Yuletide hymns till the storm passed and he regained the strength to move on. He

JOHN MCNEE

asked his savior how he would find the way home and the man assured him, 'Follow your feet and you'll get there, with good fortune hurrying on your heels'. He asked what he could do to repay the man for saving his life and was told, 'Rename your land in my honor so that when I am weak and starving I may claim whatever grows upon it as my own, share in your bounty, and be fortified'. Of course McCulloch agreed and, when he arrived back at his farm, was as good as his word, renaming the land 'St. Nicholas'.

"Over the following months, he made many trips back up the mountain, searching for his savior's cabin to bring him gifts of food and drink. But he could never find it, and the friends and family with whom he shared his remarkable story reasoned it must have been a dream or guardian angel, for no man could make a life up on that unforgiving rock.

"The next summer, McCulloch's land yielded gold and in a few months, he had a working mine and a whole town to support it. The town of St. Nicholas, named in recognition of the man or saint or angel who made it possible. But it wasn't until three years later, on Christmas Eve, that McCulloch finally saw his savior again. With another blizzard buffeting the town, he answered a knock at the door and found the same grand figure standing there in his garments of red and white, laughing behind his snowy beard, bells in his furs jingling with the motion of his big, round belly, and a burlap sack in his hand. He told McCulloch of how hungry he was and reminded him of the deal they'd struck, that for as long as the land bore his name he could claim all that grew there as his own. And McCulloch—in no need of being reminded for he had not forgotten—welcomed the man into his home, introduced him to his family and led him on a tour of his expansive pantry, bidding him take his pick from its rich bounty. And such a bounty it was, children, for McCulloch's winter larder, primed for the Christmas feast, was stuffed from floor to ceiling with such nourishing delicacies derived of fruit, grain, bird and beast, and all grown on the land which bore the name St. Nicholas. And he told the man, 'Take your pick.'

"And so doing, the man snatched up McCulloch's two youngest, plumpest children and bundled them into his sack. Then he threw them over his shoulder, stalked off into the snow, and carried them away up the mountain, never to be seen again by living eyes.

HAIL SANTA!

“And poor McCulloch, though he loved his babies well, there was nothing he could do but stand and watch. For as I’m sure you all know, from all the tales you’ve been told, whether it’s fairies, trolls, spirits, serpents, genies, goblins, Santa Claus, or the devil himself . . . a deal is a deal.”

A stunned silence filled the room and the priest drank it in, his eye roving across the faces of the children before him, each one twisted in horror. Internally, he reveled in their shock and discomfort. As a younger man, relying on the Good Book, his oration had saved and inspired, infuriated and repelled. With a well-told tale, he could nudge a man toward charity or degeneracy. These days, his only hope of seeing any reaction at all to his words was when scaring schoolchildren. And he lapped it up without shame.

“Well?” He grinned, his gaze coming to rest on the face of Devon McCulloch. “That there is a true story. What did you all think?”

For a brief, all-too-wonderful moment, he thought the boy might cry. His shoulders heaved with panicked breaths. His wide, black eyes watered. His gaping mouth quivered, his entire face on the verge of erupting into a hot, red wail of a terror tantrum.

But then the kid cut the act. His face relaxed. The gasps ceased. He leaned back in his chair, eyes narrowing beneath a brow creased in contempt as, sneering, he said, “We’ve heard it already.”

Father McHattie’s ear twitched at the sound of a click from behind him. He turned in his chair to find one of the children had somehow snuck past him during the story, gone to the door and locked it. He turned back to see all the rest rising from their chairs, stepping to the sides of their desks, their expressions hard and mean, all eyes on him.

Unable to comprehend what was happening—beyond some dim recognition of a coordinated effort against him—he wondered, briefly, if he too should stand up.

But then they rushed him. And he saw it was already too late.