

A Song in the Sky

Even if the Arctic had grown warmer, his own sensibilities were more acute with age. "Old bones..." murmured EcoSanta as he crossed the ice, his gloved hand stroking the reindeers' fur as they waited patiently.

Each year, before the rigours of his gift-giving flight, EcoSanta liked to ride a silent sledge from the high latitudes of the Arctic Circle to the nearest human settlements. He could view the land from on high, dark and jagged against the soft ripples of the sea.

The wisps of his beard rippled too, a good way to judge the wind. Conditions were perfect tonight. With a whisking sound upon the ice, EcoSanta launched his sledge in a skyward swoop. He settled back, trusting the reindeers' instincts when it came to navigation. A wide, looping route took him across Spitsbergen, then down the coast of Norway towards the Scottish highlands.

Towns were dotted below in speckles of white - for as yet, their seasonal lights were dormant. No doubt ready and waiting, thought EcoSanta, in this calm November interlude.

The sledge had a radio, a recent acquisition, so EcoSanta twiddled the dial. Somehow, he found music and voices in the cold air, rising from the wider world. There was a grim discussion on the economy and some thumping chords that made

him wince. What he sought were those cheerful melodies that marked the season so well.

There was more babble on the radio, then - yes, a festive tune! First of the season, he thought. Along with carols, EcoSanta recognized the catchy pop songs that recurred each year. There were old favourites about white Christmases, rocking around a tree or wishing it could be Christmas every day. Once heard, they were hard to forget - although EcoSanta wished their messages were less concerned with tinsel, food and drink. He was no Scrooge, to be sure, but there was more to Christmas than consumer tastes.

EcoSanta could see the beauty of Earth from on high, with a curve of twilight beneath a scattering of stars. A meteor flashed a luminous trail, fading to a mere twinkle.

Of course, he did not idealize the world below. Should he spot environmental problems, or hear of them on the radio, EcoSanta would always try to make a difference. True, he could seldom do this in person. The seasonal nature of his public role, along with a somewhat creaky body, meant it was best to recruit others. His elves were his helpers on the ground, tackling pollution and waste in their nimble way - mostly unseen by the public. Occasionally, a sensitive child might glimpse their ethereal bodies. But it was *he*, thought EcoSanta, who set them to work. Without his wisdom and custodianship, the environment would surely suffer.

Still, EcoSanta was a little dissatisfied. He was celebrated as a figure of jest and jollity, not a champion of ecological insight. While he did not seek excessive thanks, EcoSanta wanted to give his image a greener aura, truly in tune with nature.

As he tugged the reins of his faithful steeds, turning back to the north, EcoSanta had a sudden thought. Could a song about the beauty of winter, with clean air and unspoilt seas, become as catchy as the materialist ditties that filled the radio waves? It could include hints about his secret work, guarding this earthly domain. Once heard, never forgotten...

The return trip passed Reykjavik, brushing the edge of Greenland before heading back to the pole. The sledge hissed to a halt on the snowy expanse, with aurora shimmering above. Apart from these optical tricks, the scene was shadowy and silent. After giving treats to the reindeer, EcoSanta trudged towards a yellow glow that fell from a frosty dome - a place of warmth for the shivering old man, his spirits renewed the more.

The dome was a little igloo that led to his deeper home. Inside, EcoSanta cranked the handle of a hand-winched lift that slowly took him down. Below was a snugger realm of tunnels and caves, carved from the ancient ice. Here, elves tinkered at the clever handicrafts that conjured many a toy. Most were in bed by now.

EcoSanta glimpsed sealed paint pots and silent tools, seeking the light of a smaller alcove where a most diligent elf still worked. There, lively eyes acknowledged him. A quill was stilled upon a Christmas card, its composition half-done, as the elf greeted his master and friend.

Over a glass of mulled cranberry juice, EcoSanta explained his idea. The elf's face gleamed in delight, keen to embark on the task. EcoSanta was happy to leave him and snore the rest of the night away.

Soon, the elf was humming the beginnings of a melody and, quill in hand, scribed the first evocative words. As his nib continued down the page, the elf caught the vistas of winter in vivid verse - with a catchy chorus, of course.

A few weeks later, in December, the towns and cities of the high latitudes were lit in resplendent style. Power surged through multicoloured bulbs, turning the settlements into splashes of rainbow light. They dotted the land like giant decorations, awaiting a convivial bringer of gifts.

They were fancy, thought EcoSanta - but when it came to beauty, nature had the upper hand. While he did not shirk his traditional duties, he had an extra flourish this year.

As his sledge buzzed the silent rooftops, a strangely memorable song drifted in its wake. The effect was magical, though the means pragmatic. Onboard, a needle followed the groove of a gramophone record, playing over and over again. EcoSanta had some skilful elves, adept at mechanical tricks.

The spinning label bore the name of the diligent elf, something of a one-hit wonder. So what of his song? The title was part of the lyrics too, repeated in every chorus. It found the peaceful sleepers below, wafting through their dreams. In the morning, they would wake and remember.

The World is Our Greatest Gift.