

OPERATION COOKIE DOUGH

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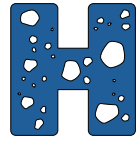
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‘This is how it is, how it comes to pass, and how it shall be.’

HOW IT BEGAN



ere we are, two years ago now, as freshly fallen snow crunches beneath a pair of boots, urgently seeking a way out through a rapidly changing landscape, while the ever-heavier snowfall remains as relentless and unforgiving as ever.

Though the world is white, the gathering night steadily narrows his view. Even his red cloak is invisible to the man trudging onwards, hoping to find some familiar sign. He turns up his collar, for the snow has found its way inside, adding to his discomfort.

His thoughts begin to wander. *What had he been thinking? That this was a good idea? At this hour? Going for a walk? With all his years of experience, he should have known better; there can be no argument about that. He will certainly hear about what a bad idea this was, should he ever manage to find his way back.*

He mutters and muses about all the walks he has taken before, and cannot bring himself to tell the truth. People might start worrying. For the time being, he decides to keep the reason for his walk to himself.

Above him glimmers a spark of hope. A tiny light appears on the horizon. He walks towards it. The 'horizon' turns out to be far away, high above him. His sense of direction is failing him badly.

Above him shines a star as bright as the brightest morning after a warm summer's day. It is the way home. The brightest star in the sky. The North Star. *How often has it saved him... saved him in his younger years, when he was still young and immature? By now, he should know better...*

And then, suddenly, without warning, without any sign of life, he bumps into something. At last, the storm begins to ease, and something stops his foot in its tracks. A strange sound can be heard, as though it is very close by. He listens and breathes; his breath is visible once more.

The bright star in the sky is now doing its work to perfection. Just like that, as though lost and never seen before, it lies there in front of him: the young animal, the young creature. Utterly alone, utterly lost. As though abandoned, never to be found again.

It breathes, it moves, albeit only slightly. It stares at him with wide eyes, as though searching for a rescuer, a saviour in its hour of need who will make everything right. The man takes the little

animal into his care and notices something extraordinary. This is not just any creature.

In the light of the ever-brightening star, the same light shines from the creature now lying in his arms. Its blue glow reflects upon him. The radiance is bright and luminous, as though created by the North Star itself.

This is the moment, the man thinks, the moment I have been waiting for. Without knowing why, he walks home, knowing that this is how it must be, though he cannot yet see the whole picture.

'This is how it is, how it comes to pass, and how it shall be.'

Once home, he receives help. Everyone rushes over and helps to care for the little reindeer. It makes adorable little sounds and seems truly at home. The Stable Master gives the signal, raising the alarm for an emergency rescue procedure.

Help comes rushing from all sides and assistance is given. The Stable Master personally carries the little creature to its place: a newly made space in the home of the reindeer. Here he will stay.

'He is to stay until he has recovered', is the Stable Master's advice.

The man knows better. Big Red, or the boss, has already thought it through and knows what it means: this little animal is here to stay, that much is certain. The alarm marking the start of the day sounds and everyone takes their place. The season has begun and there must be no delay. It is already mid-December, so time is running short.

'Now it is time for serious business', comes the announcement. Everyone distracted by the adorable newcomer is sent back to work.

The boss knows it: he is convinced that fate has smiled upon him. How remains to be seen, but to him this is a sign: an ancient sign that everything will fall into place.

For now, however, he must attend to entirely different matters. He shuts himself away to consider what must be done. THE days are drawing near, so haste is essential, and his walk was not a good choice at this particular moment. He will have to postpone his hikes: several snowstorms are forecast; he has already seen that.

And so the days pass and Christmas draws ever closer. The young animal is settling in well. He grows stronger and forms friendships with the other reindeer, each of whom is different.

One is a listener, another one to play with, but above all, everyone gets along with him.

It earns him a name, a fitting name, for he makes friends quickly. He is cheerful and gentle by nature, which soon earns him the name Alwin.

For now, he still receives his fair share of criticism for his impetuous nature, but they will soon change their tune, Alwin thinks. Now is the moment: it is now or never. He belongs here and they are going to know it. He never thought he would achieve this, that he would make it this far. And now, now the time has finally come. He will make his presence felt, whether they like it or not. He is here and they are going to know it.

He prances about and is never bored. He hangs out near the bakery, where he regularly steals a cookie or gazes hungrily at the dough, or loiters by the workshop to see whether there is anything to play with. *For now, he must be careful: the Big Boss might catch him any moment, and who knows what consequences that might have...*

And so it came to pass.

Alwin plays and eats, plays and eats to his heart's content. Some days he finds himself thinking about the past, about the old

days, but then he quickly steels himself and pulls himself together. *Perhaps this was not all he had hoped for.*

Now, however, he has reached the upper echelons, and he is very proud of it. *At last, status; at last, rhythm. At last, everything, with no responsibility,* he tells himself.

Now the time has come for me to do as I please, is the thought that keeps returning to him.

Above all, he is wilful and athletic. This leads to comical scenes when he leaps gracefully and flamboyantly over the hills. *One thing is clear to him: he is never leaving this place.* Yet the days begin to turn against him. He is growing older and, with age, more responsible - or at least that is what is expected of him. He must now behave like an adult as he approaches the age of two.

That brings us to the present. He is celebrated, praised for his tireless efforts to entertain others, though he himself is enjoying it less and less. *No, what he wants is adventure; that is what he wants, and the moment is approaching... THE moment. THE moment when everything can change.* He can think of nothing else; he longs for it to arrive.

He will make it happen, everything that lies ahead of him, and he certainly will not fail in his mission to make the most of every opportunity, he tells himself.

And so it came to pass, though it will be a little while yet.
Elsewhere, very different matters are unfolding..

In another place, at that very moment, a young boy is walking down the street on his way home. His sense of self-worth is intact - unless he encounters someone intent on taking it from him.

On his way home, a bully lies in wait: someone who will do everything he can to make the boy stop believing in himself. The boy, however, tries to stand his ground, to be brave, just as he has so often been told.

Easy to say, he thinks; try doing it all on your own.

So often he has told himself that he is capable of turning the tide. But when the bullies stand before him, that proves rather easier said than done. He encounters them yet again on his lonely journey home.

At school, he has plenty to say, but no one wants to listen. And so he talks to himself. Very often. Simply to banish the loneliness hiding inside him. Once again, he is fighting that feeling.