Father Christmas And Me



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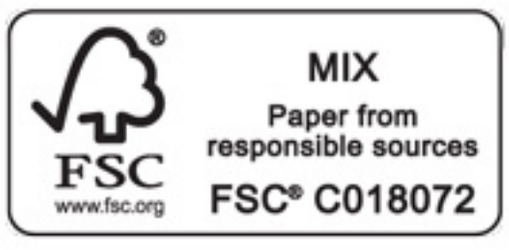
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Somewhere Else

You might think you know about Father Christmas. And I'm sure you do know *some* things. You probably know about the Toy Workshop and the reindeer. You know what happens every Christmas Eve. Of course you do.

But the thing you probably don't know about is me.

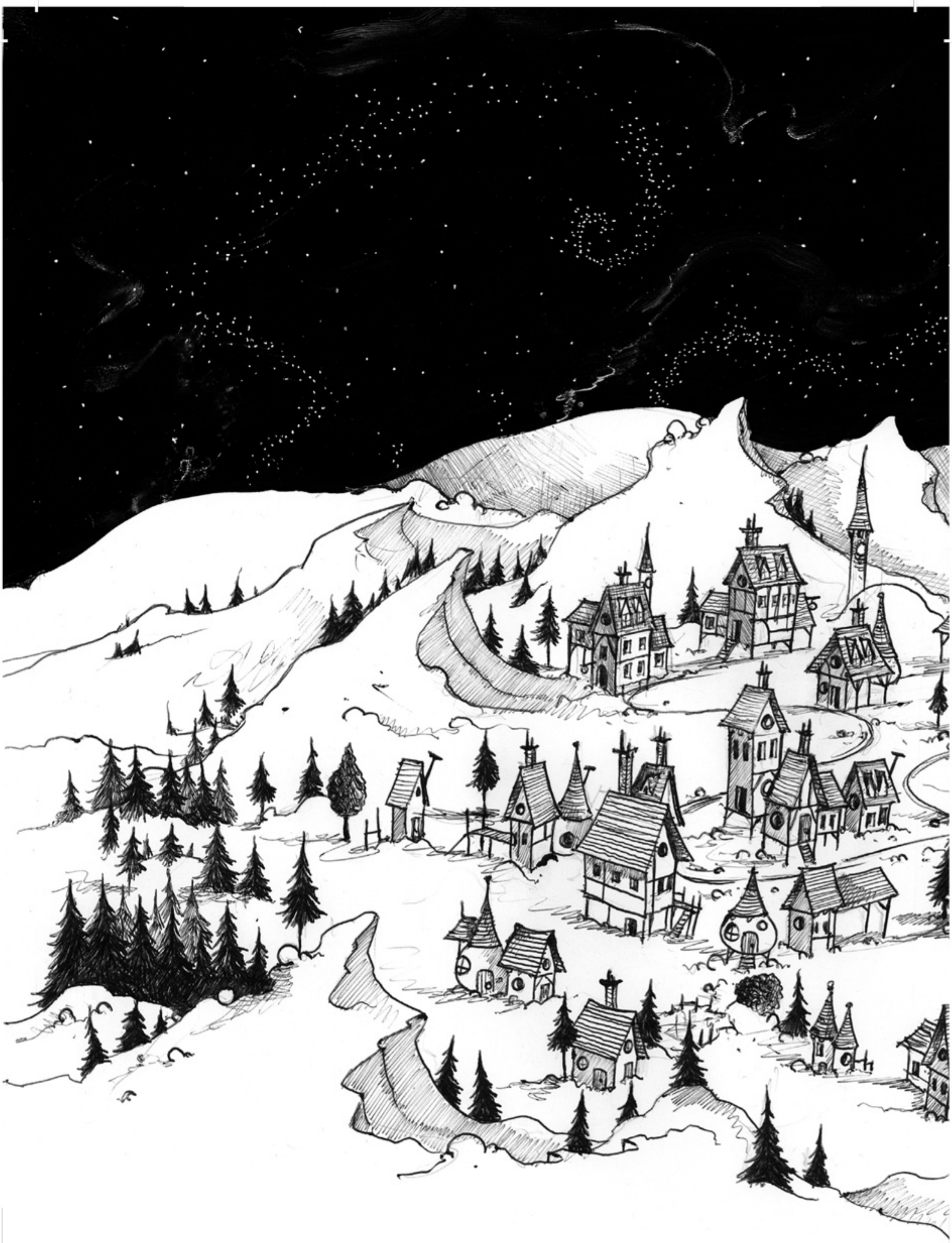
I will start by telling you the things that are easy to believe.

My name is Amelia Wishart and I have a black cat called Captain Soot. I was born in London, and I lived there until I was eleven years old. And then I lived *somewhere else*.

It is the *somewhere else* that you might find a bit unlikely.

I suppose I could tell you that I moved to Finland, and you would have no problem believing that, because Finland is on a map. And it is, technically, true. I did move to Finland, in the far far *far* North,

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beyond the bit of Finland known as Lapland. The *somewhere else* I lived was simply called the Far North and the town was Elfhelm. Now, Elfhelm isn't on any maps. Not human ones, anyway. And the reason for this is that *most people can't see it*. It's *invisible* to them. You see, Elfhelm is a magical place, and to see magical places you have to believe in magic. And the type of humans who draw all the maps are the people least likely to believe in magic.

But Elfhelm is an ordinary town in lots of ways. A small town. An oversized village, really. And there are normal things there, like shops and houses and a town hall. There are streets and trees and even a bank.

But the people who live there are *very* different to me. And *very* different to you too.

They aren't even people. Not *human* people anyway.

They are special. They are magic.

They are, well . . .

They are elves. But the thing is, if you are surrounded by elves, it isn't the elves that are the weird, unusual creatures.

No.

It's you.

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7 Reindeer Road

Father Christmas lived at 7 Reindeer Road, right next to Reindeer Field, on the edge of Elfhelm.

His house, like many of the houses in Elfhelm, was made of reinforced gingerbread, and – unlike almost all other houses in Elfhelm – it had a front door so large you didn't have to bend forwards to walk through it.



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It was full of fun things. There was a slide down from the first floor to the ground floor. The doorbell played a version of 'Jingle Bells'. There were toys everywhere. The kitchen had shelves full of the tastiest sweet things in jars – chocolate, gingerbread, cloudberry jam. There was a reindeer clock in the living room, which was like a cuckoo clock but instead of a cuckoo popping out it was a reindeer. Oh, and it didn't tell ordinary human time with boring things like 'six o'clock' and 'twenty past nine'. It told elf time, and elf hours were called things like Very Early Indeed and Way Past Bedtime.

Father Christmas had been living on his own but he quickly got Slumber, the elf bedmaker, to build two extra beds and 'the world's comfiest cat basket' for Captain Soot.

'Though tonight,' he said that first day, 'I'll sleep downstairs on the trampoline.' Father Christmas insisted that it was a very comfy trampoline.

The reason Father Christmas needed two extra beds was because of Mary Ethel Winters and myself.

Mary was the woman Father Christmas was in love with. He blushed every time he looked at her. And she loved him too.

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Mary was the kindest and loveliest woman I had ever met. Her cheeks were as rosy as apples and her smile could warm a room. I had first known her when I was in London, when the very worst thing of all happened. My mother caught a horrible illness from cleaning chimneys. I did all I could to look after her, but in the end the illness was too powerful. I couldn't stop her dying. My father had left us when I was very little, so after that I was sent to Mr Jeremiah Creeper's workhouse. I was utterly miserable, but Mary – who worked

in the kitchens there – was always nice to me. She would secretly add a spoonful of honey to the watery gruel we had to eat. I'll never forget that.

She'd had a tough life. Before she had gone to the workhouse she had been homeless and slept on a bench next to Tower Bridge, surrounded by pigeons.

Anyway, when Captain Soot and I eventually escaped the workhouse, thanks to Father Christmas, Mary came with us. And, like me, she was very pleased to be here.

We arrived in Elfhelm on Christmas Day, when every human child in the world was opening their presents, and we ate the biggest Christmas dinner I had ever seen and listened to the most brilliant and happy music played by an elf band called the Sleigh Belles. We laughed and sang and spickle danced. Spickle dancing is a very complicated type of elf dancing which involves a lot of energetic leg work, a lot of twisting, and some floating magically in the air.

'I think you are going to like it here,' Father Christmas told me later, as we went ice skating on a frozen lake.

'Yes, I think I will,' I said.

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And I did. I did like it there. Well for a while.
Before I managed to smash my own happiness
into a million pieces.

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Hope Toffee



To get anywhere in Elfhelm you had to walk along a big street called the Main Path. Elves weren't always very original with their names. For instance, there was another street with seven curves that they called the Street of Seven Curves.

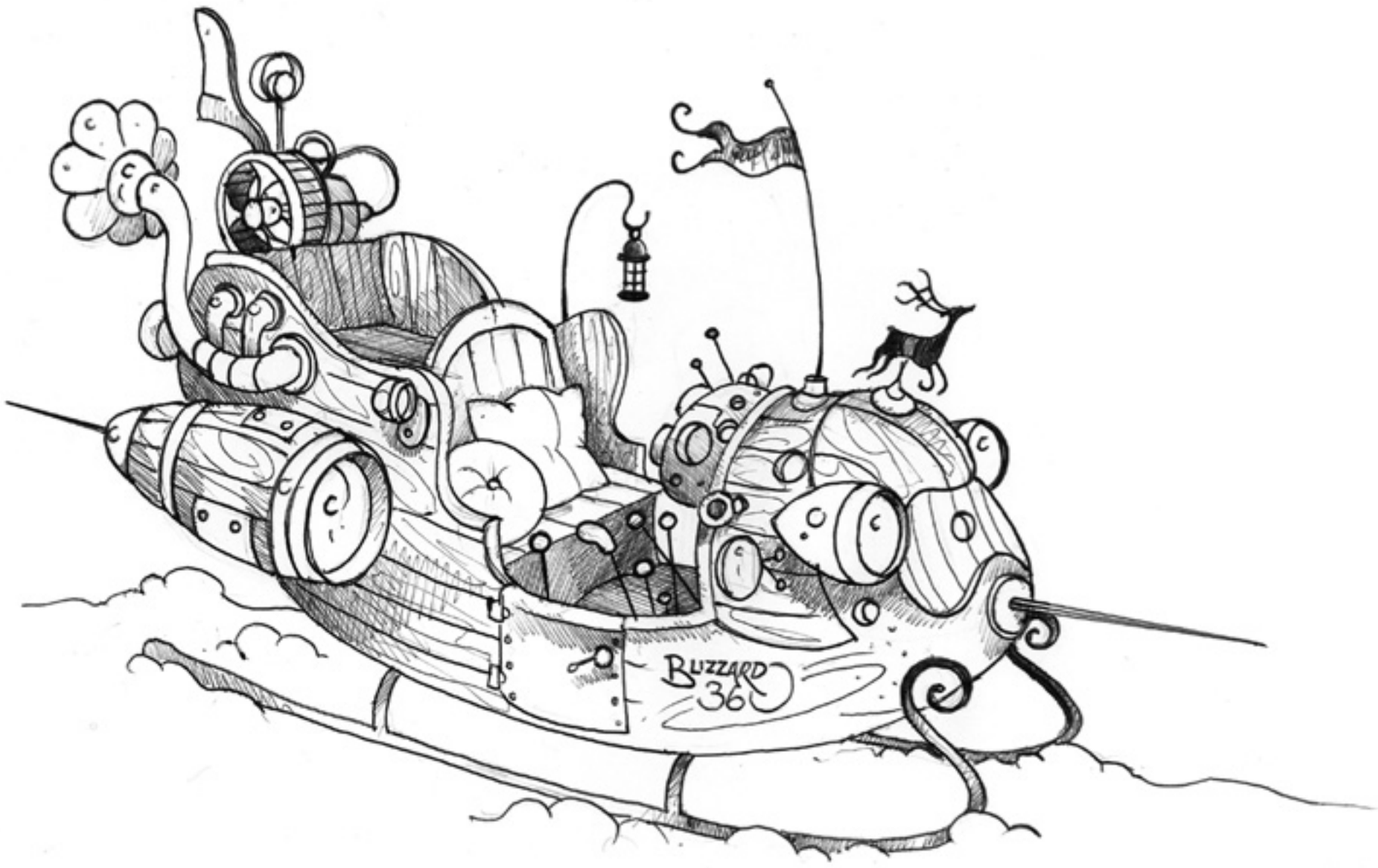
Anyway, as we walked along the Main Path the whole street was bustling with elves. There were clog shops, tunic shops, belt shops. There was something called the School of Sleighcraft on the Main Path too. All kinds of sleighs were there, though none looked as impressive as the one I had ridden on my journey to Elfhelm – the one Father Christmas kept parked in Reindeer Field.

Father Christmas waved at a tall (by elf standards), skinny elf who was polishing a small white sleigh. The sleigh gleamed and looked quite beautiful.

'Hello, Kip! Is that the new sleigh I've been hearing about?'

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The elf smiled. It was a small smile. The kind of smile that was surprised to be there. 'Yes, Father Christmas. The Blizzard 360.'



'She looks a beauty. Single-reindeer?'

'Yes, single-reindeer.'

And then Father Christmas started on a long and technical conversation about speedometers and harnesses and altitude gauges and compasses.

He finished their discussion with a question: 'So you'll be letting the children ride in it when the school term starts?'

Kip looked worried suddenly. 'No,' he said.

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'This isn't a child's sleigh. Look at the size of it. This is for bigger elves – grown-ups only.'

Then Mary joined in. 'Well,' she said, putting her arm around me, 'the school is getting a new child this year. A child who is bigger than an elf child. A child who is actually taller than an elf grown-up.'

'This is Amelia,' added Father Christmas, 'and believe me, she is a natural sleigh rider.'

Kip stared at me and turned as pale as snow. 'Oh. I see. Um. Err. Right. Well.'

And that was it. He went back to polishing his sleigh and we carried on walking along the street.

'Poor Kip,' said Father Christmas softly. 'He had a terrible childhood.'

Every other elf we saw was very friendly and talkative. Mother Breer the beltmaker fitted Father Christmas with a new belt. ('Oh, Father Christmas, your belly has *grown*. We're going to have to make an extra hole.')

Then we went to the sweet shop and met Bonbon the sweetmaker, who let us taste some of the new things she had been working on. We tried the Purple Cloudberry Fudge and a strong-tasting aniseed-y sweet called Blitzen's Revenge (named after Father Christmas's

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favourite reindeer) and then the Baby Soother.

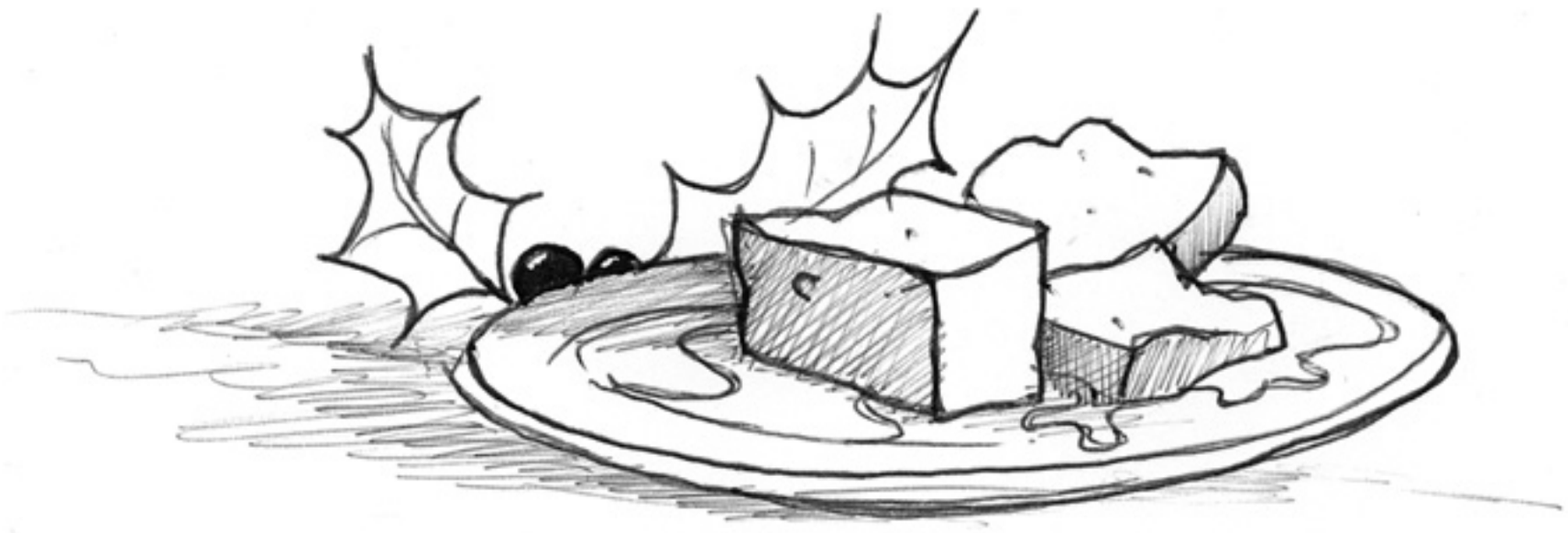
'Why is it called the Baby Soother?' I asked. And then she pointed to her baby – 'little Suki' – who had a cute face and pointed ears, and was sitting happily in a bouncy chair, sucking on a sweet.

'It always works on her,' said Bonbon.

The most incredible sweet of all, though, was the one called Hope Toffee.

'Ooh, toffee,' I said, clapping my hands. 'I love toffee. What does this one taste of?'

Bonbon looked at me as if I had said something very stupid. 'It is *Hope* Toffee. It tastes of whatever you hope it tastes like.'



So when I put it in my mouth I hoped very hard that it would taste like chocolate, and it did taste like chocolate, and then I hoped it

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would taste like apple pie, and the sweet heated up in my mouth and became exactly like apple pie, and then I thought of the roasted chestnuts I used to eat every Christmas, before Mother had become poorly, and there they were, tender and warm and crumbling like a memory in my mouth. And this last taste, although delicious, also made me feel sad that I didn't have a mother any more, so I swallowed it and didn't ask for another one. I had some Giggle Candy instead, which tickled my tongue and made me laugh.

The shop doorbell tinkled and in walked a smartly dressed couple, both wearing red tunics. One of them had glasses and a bald head, and the other was as round as a globe.

'Ah, hello, Pi,' said Father Christmas to the one with glasses.

He then turned to me. 'Pi is your new mathematics teacher.'

'Hello,' Pi said, chewing on some liquorice. 'You're a human. I've heard about human mathematics. It sounds most ridiculous.'

I was confused. 'I thought mathematics was the same everywhere.'

Pi laughed. 'Quite the opposite! Quite the opposite!'

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