

CSSET – Gus and Sibling Stew for Christmas

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“Home for Christmas . . . what was I thinking!”

The little tomte, youngest and only male of thirteen siblings appeared in the snow-covered spruce tree just above the front door of his family home in Tomteberget, closest invisible mountain to the North Pole.

In the next moment, Joyce, his youngest older sister appeared on the doorstep with a backpack on and her Snow Globe Communicator in her hand, nodding as she tucked it away in her practical moss green coat. Only the sprig of holly attached to her matching sock hat gave any indication of the season.

“Gus, you came!” she said, startled by the looming brother in the tree branch above.

Gus looked deeper into the tree to see if he could disappear, but she too was a mythical tomte and could see him no matter where he went.

“Joy,” he said appearing by her side, and giving her a familiar nudge with his shoulder. His bright blue coat and his red and white striped socks were a cheery contrast to the snow and the white tole-painted bench on the front porch. He, too, had a similar sprig of holly pinned to the border of his bright red lumpy sock hat—the long end of which was wrapped around his neck like a scarf.

“News of your interview is all over the tomtar world! You were quite a hit! Singing in the Christmas program with the Tomte Tellers? Extraordinary! Good for you, min bror.”

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Looking at his gloomy face, Joyce tried again. “So good to see you this year.”

“Is something wrong?” she said in a low voice, not entering the house just yet.

“Go ahead. Gloat about how I made a mess of things again. My act of kindness backfired, as usual.” He looked at her pleadingly for a short minute. “How will I ever be as great as Farfar— Gustaff the Adventure? Gus said longingly. “I carry his name and I have yet to be truly great like he is.”

“That’s quite a pair of shoes to fill. Why do you care?”

“Well, Dad certainly didn’t care, did he. Pappa took that librarian job. How many hours did we spend there growing up? I want adventure.”

“Pappa is the head of the . . .” But Joyce was interrupted by the front door being thrown wide open. Their mother stood in the doorway wiping her hands on the homemade apron she had embroidered with Swedish hearts among green vines around the bottom border.

“They’re here, Taffy, I can’t believe my eyes,” the short, rather plump tomte called over her shoulder to her husband Gustaff II using her favorite endearing nickname for him. “I know only three of our children could make it this year but it will be a merry Christmas even so.” Sunnah wrapped her arms around her two youngest children pulling them through the doorway and into the huge living room their uncles had built onto their small red house with traditional white trim.

Before the door could be closed a puff of perfume preceded the next sister’s arrival. Maja flamboyantly waltzed through the entrance.

“I have arrived. Oh good Gus, you may gather my bags from the porch and take them to my room. Mamma, you look won...derful!” she said stretching out her words, leaning down to

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kiss the older lady on the cheek. Her brilliant, multicolored cape floated behind her and met her sophisticated boots in the same outlandish colors.

“Min Far,” she said floating into the room and greeting their father as he stood up from preparing the fire in the brick fireplace.

“Maja”, he replied, but her peck of a kiss on his cheek was quickly followed by a swirl of her cape as she turned around in the room.

“Always so adorable, Pappa,” she said splayed out on the couch, leaving no room for anyone else.

Sunnah called from the kitchen full of cheerfulness, sunny as her name and yellow dress suggest. “Taffy, the presents will go in the corner behind the tree. Would you mind stacking them so they don’t spill into the livingroom as the kids bring them in?”

“Sure min älska, my love,” Gustaff II replied. “Maja, can I have Gus bring yours down from your room?”

Maja was suddenly a little nervous, then recovered with a wave of one arm. “Åh Pappa, you’re too cute. Presents are so passé. I’m here, isn’t that enough?” she said with a practiced winning smile, knowing her father could never refuse her anything.

“Of course,” he said his eyes glowing in appreciation of his famous daughter, tomte of the Stallion Premier Racing Stables in California.

“How is Sampson, your prize equine?”

“Sampson sends his love, Father.”

“And how about his owner?”

“The brute can’t see the true masterfulness of Sampson, and denies him the extraordinary comfort he deserves. Humans,” she ended with a bit of a huff.

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“I’ve set aside some of the most beautiful coffee table books for you to enjoy. Perhaps they might give you inspiration to create one for Sampson.”

“Oh father, how droll you are. There are journalists, authors who do that kind of thing. I am too busy creating a world class race horse.”

“Of course, he said quickly moving the offending books to a shelf at the far end of the room.

“Min Mor, what *is* that smell?”

“Our family-famous Christmas stew, naturally,”

Both Gus and Joyce looked at Maja in disbelief.

Gus went right into his expected melodramatic role. “The same one, dear sister, Mamma has made for the last century. I didn’t notice any Christmas boxes to bring down. Is there another bag of yours somewhere?”

“Oh, you,” she said, rolling her eyes with a smirk.

“So, Joy, how have you been? Invented anything fantastic lately?” Mamma said, overriding her daughter. Sunnah hovered over her award-winning stew, heralded by all in Tomteberget as the very best ever.

“Thank you for asking, Mamma. As a matter of fact, I am working on the next level of Snow Globe Communicators and . . .”

With a brush of her mind-boggling cape of brilliant colors, Maja interrupted. “How quaint. Another genius in the house.” she said, bowing slightly indicating that she too was a brilliant one.

“Dear mother, when does Farfar arrive. I’ve been dying to see him. Such a famous man. Grandfather is a true trophy in our family heritage,” Maja added dramatically.

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“I . . . I’m not sure he’s coming. You know how he is, so busy saving the world and all,” Sunnah said lifting the lid unnecessarily and leaning over it as if it were the most important thing in the world.

“Not coming? Surely you tease me? Sampson and I are depending on my having a long chat with him. I mean, I am longing to have a chat with him.”

Maja was noticeably taken aback by the news, but quickly recovered with a flourish. “Then I shall go to him. Where is the dear famous tomte?”

“Oh, look at the time. Joy, would you pop the rye bread into the oven. I do love my human kitchen appliance. And Gus, would you start the Swedish braid? It will be just right for Christmas Winter morning. That’s right,” she said, shooing her younger two into the depths of the eclectic kitchen.

“I must check on Herr Gordon and his wife Gladys you know. I’ll be right back.” And with that, Sunna was out the door and treading down the path to the small cottages across the street.

“Min far,” Maja said finding her father, not to be dissuaded in her hunt for Farfar.

“Ja,” Taffy said as he too was busy decorating the tree. “Would you like to help me?”

“You know how deflated I am by the time I arrive, tomte-travel lag, I am sure. But Pappa, where is the great Gustaff the Adventurer!” Her annoyance came right to the surface and turned her face a bit purple.

“Not everything is as it appears, Maja. He is in a bit of a slump and is taking some time off.”

“And why would that prevent him from coming to see me, I mean us?” she said with a slight demand in her voice.

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“There she goes again,” Gus said to Joyce while they worked together in the kitchen.

“Why does Pappa put up with her when she goes all ballistic like that?” Gus checked the recipe and looked quite comical in the short apron and flour decorating the top of his red sock hat, as well as his grand nose.

“Some people need more attention, I guess,” Joyce said while grinding a bit of fresh cardamom for the braid.

“She must be up to something. I miss Farfar too, and I have stories to share with him about his snow globe communicator and stuff. But you won’t hear me practically yelling at Pappa.”

“Maybe that’s it, Gus. Maybe that’s what we need to find out. Maybe we can help her. It is Christmas after all.

“Step Through and Do Something New,” they both said at the same time, quoting Shad the radio show host.

“She is never going to tell us what is really going on.” Gus said mixing the dry ingredients in a big bowl.

“Then we, um, go to California,” Joy said never looking up as she cracked the eggs into a small bowl.

“Go to California? Are you nuts? That’s like a gazillion miles away!” Gus had stopped stirring mid-sentence, with a floured wooden spoon wildly waving in the air for emphasis.

“Ah, come on,” Joyce said whisking the eggs into the frothy yeast and water that barely filled the bottom of the other huge bowl. “I’m ready for cups of your flour mix.”

“So, you think we can disappear and nobody will notice?” Gus said shoveling some of the flour into the wet mix while Joyce stirred.

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“You take the first 50 strokes and I’ll clean up a bit and take the next 50. We’ll add the rest of the flour and set it up to rise. It should be the perfect time to pull out Mamma’s rye bread by then and we’ll have about 90 minutes before the next part of making the Swedish Braid. What do you say?”

“Nuts, I tell you, but I’m ready for an adventure.”

“Let’s go visit Sampson,” In the blink of an eye, their kitchen duties were done and the two siblings, one in blue and one in moss green were gone.

And ‘poof’ they appeared, invisible - of course, at the stable in California, right where Sampson should have been.

“Something is wrong,” Joy said looking around.

“Right. There is absolutely no snow. . . it’s not even cold here and its Christmas.”

“Not that,” Joy said, looking around and walking to an empty stall.

“Oh my, my, my,” Gus said in agreement. “Where is his nameplate?”

“There he is!” Joy said dragging her brother by his arm. “They are putting him into that beat-up horse trailer, and that isn’t one the stable uses.”

“They are stealing him! That can’t be!” Gus said with eyes bulging out of his head.

“Listen,” Joy said pushing him behind the last shed as his fear was allowing for his blue coat to show.

“That’s the answer,” said a slimy short human, as he counted the money, his partner closing up the tailgate behind Sampson.

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“Let’s go Slick,” a female replied in an irritated voice. “The horse seems to be looking around for something. Let’s split before somebody notices.” She threw a brass rectangle plate into the front seat of the pickup truck that was attached ready to lead the one-horse trailer away.

“We’ve got to tell Maja!” Joy said.

“There’s not time,” Gus answered in a voice that was finding calm just out of reach.

“Maybe we can use this,” Gus said watching himself shift back and forth between being visible and invisible.

“Good idea!” Joyce said. “I’ll go find the manager and whisper in his ear to get him out the door and at the gate of the stables.”

“And I’ll distract the thieves before they can drive away,” Gus nodded. “But I’ve got to calm Sampson first. He doesn’t sound too happy.”

“See you soon.”

Gus strode right out from behind the shed and pulled the bolt out of its metal pocket, letting the tail-gate of the battered old horse trailer drop. “Sampson old boy,” he said in a reassuring tone. The nervous horse sidestepped at the loud boom and the rattle of the unfamiliar trailer that was sure to be taking him away from the other horses he knew.

“I’m Gus, the brother of Maja,” he said moving quickly within eyesight of the beautifully lean racehorse.

Sampson’s large head looked over his shoulder in the cramped space to see the similar face of his tomte, Maja, hidden beneath a pointy white beard, and calmed just a bit.

“There we are, Gus said putting his hand beneath Sampson’s nose so the masterful horse could catch his sent.

Gus stroked his neck lightly, careful not to make any sudden moves.

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“Maja sends her love,” Gus said chuckling at the line he had heard his sister use a million times.

At that familiar saying, Sampson relaxed a little, nudging the tomte and pushing Gus’s hat askew.

“What! How did that happen! Don’t you ever do anything right?” as the boom of the tail-gate sounded. The snide comment was apparently one the short man used often.

“If I didn’t have to do everything myself, we’d be out of here by now,” the woman in the worn coat said as she slammed the driver door and went to the back to see how the tail gate had dropped open. “You were supposed to put the lock on it. Where’s the lock?” she yelled.

“Right here!” he said. “Heads up. Here it comes.”

With that the padlock flew from the passenger side of the door over the truck and landed in the dirt by the tongue of the trailer.

“Useless, good for nothing, “ mumbled the woman as she dug in the dirt.

“Now Sampson, can I just back you up and we’ll get you back to where you belong.” Gus said as the horse allowed the tomte to guide him back out of the trailer.

Still mumbling, the woman in the oversized coat stood up and felt the rumble in the trailer and the hooves backing out and down the ramp.

“Dear lady,” Gus said, appearing, and disappearing as his fear came and went while backing Sampson out.

“I’m not letting that horse out of . . .” the weathered older woman, stopped short, her mouth dropping as she shook her head trying to see the obvious hallucination clearly. . . but the tomte was still there . . . and then he wasn’t . . . then he was.

“Slick, you’re not gonna believe this!” she said, standing stock still.

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Sampson had not totally exited the trailer and was turning around at the hand of a short elf type being who had to reach up just to touch the muzzle of the fine horse.

The loud creak of the gate to the stable ground sounded as the manager had tested it to see that it moved correctly. He seemed to struggle with what to do next.

“Now, you buzzard!” the woman yelled. She said staring at the prize horse walking away and the escape route closing right in front of her. “Get in! We gotta Go!”

With that, the roar of the rattle-trap truck sounded and jerked forward with the empty horse trailer dragging behind it. In a puff of dirt and gravel, the odd duo blasted through the closing space of the driveway, as the manager scratched his head, recognized the passenger and yelled for them to stop!

“Wait for me,” yelled a young lad who jumped the fence and was running after the trailer. “Sorry boss,” he yelled behind him. “They paid me a lot of money to set up this steal. It ain’t worth it none!” The young man pulled the money out of his coat pocket letting it ride on the wind back into the stable yard as he fled.

“Whose they?” the manager bellowed after the culprits getting away.

“Sorry! Good Bye!” was all that could be heard over the rumble and roar of the getaway vehicle.

The next thing the manager knew, a fancy bright red truck drove up and pulled to a fast stop. The driver got out, and stood right next to him, eyes bulging out of his head.

“I did it. Now tell those imaginary beings to leave me alone! Keep the money, I don’t care. All I want is to be left alone.”

“Grady, what are you talking about.”

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“Herman, I don’t know. All I know is . . . I did you and your animals wrong and this creepy old little guy in a tan coat and laced up boots, appears around every corner then disappears in a flash. He puts his hands on his hips and laughs . . . laughs at me! Then says something stupid like “Oh, my, my, my” while he shakes his head at me. Even My horse seems to love the short guy.”

“Calm down, Grady.”

“Calm down? I can’t calm down until I am rid of the elf-looking guy who looks like he’s dressed for a safari.”

Gus had Sampson happily back in his stall, though missing his name plate, munching on his favorite mix and had appeared invisibly next to his sister by the front gate.

“Farfar,” they both said listening to the description of the motivational being.

“Beat you home,” Joy said. And in a heart beat, the two were standing in the kitchen of their family home.

“But FATHER! I demand you to demand Farfar to arrive!”

“Something happening at the stables, min vackra?” Pappa said trying to calm Maja with no luck. “Maybe I could help?”

“Ahem,” Gus said stepping into the living room and their conversation. “I think Farfar has already solved the problem at the stables. Sometimes, help happens when you least expect it.”

“Yep,” Joy chimed in. “I think you’ll find Sampson is in good shape and the threat is gone. Oh, my, my, my!” she said with a glint in her eye and understanding in her father’s.

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“How does he do it?” Gustaff II said. “I love the library and love reading about adventures like his, but . . .”

“But you are the head of all tomtar libraries,” Joy added.

“You’re what?” Gus couldn’t believe his ears. “You’re not just a guy behind the desk? When did this happen?”

“While you were away on your adventures,” Pappa said. “We all have goals in life, just not the same ones.”

“Be right back loves,” Maja said and disappeared but was only gone a moment.

“You’re right! Sampson is fine, and sends his love,” she said magnanimously.

As they all laughed, Mamma called them in for supper. “Hopefully next year more of our children will join us, their lives are so busy. To her surprise, Maja set the table as Joy and Gus braided the dough so it could rise. And the family-famous Stew was ladled all around with thick slices of rye bread. “It looks like we all Stepped Through and Tried Something New.” They said in unison.

“Oh, my, my, my,” Pappa said quoting his own father Gustaff the Advneturer.

“Oh, yes, yes, yes,” they heard floating through the air.”