

The List

A Seasonal Story



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THE LIST

Julie Duffy

The trouble all started somewhere on the final approach into Christmas Island. Looking back, though, he knew their fate had been sealed as soon as he'd agreed to let his four helpers try out some 'upgrades'...

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"I just don't see the need." The big, bearded man had peered into the garage pit at the four excited faces staring up at him. Pushing back his fur-lined cap, he scratched at the froth of white hair that escaped from underneath. He frowned over the top of his reading glasses at the four excited faces staring up at him from the garage pit. "I've always done fine with paper in the past."

Undeterred, Murray scurried under the auto lift and pointed at the underside of the chassis. "Installed it myself," he said.

"Helped," Ephraim said.

George, self-appointed leader of the group, tapped one foot on the garage floor, jingling as he did so. "Yes, very good. Murray installed the new antenna on her belly, Ephraim helped, but it was all my idea, really. State of the art. It communicates with telecom stations on the ground below us as we fly."

"Oo-kayyyy," the big man began.

George carried right on. "And you access The List on the smartphone app I had Murray customize for us." He nodded towards the small black rectangle nestled in the big man's gloved hand.

"Yes, I see, but..." the boss tried again.

"It's the latest in ATG antennas." Murray climbed up the ladder,

bursting with a proud engineer's need to share the specs for his new toy. "My buddy Craggy's in IT with one of the big US Airlines. Remember Craggy? Kept hitting his head on the workshop ceiling? Had to go and find work elsewhere? Well, he managed to pull a few strings. Found me this baby. Surplus."

Murray puffed out his chest, waiting for the 'ho ho ho' that usually signaled the big man's approval. Instead, there was a yawning, awkward silence.

Midge, the smallest of the four helpers, shoved her oversized hat out of her eyes and nudged Murray. "Nicely done, Murray."

Murray wagged his stocking cap in an 'it's nothing' kind of gesture, but everyone could tell that was just for show. The big man was still staring up at the disfigured belly of his beloved vehicle.

Murray tried again, "There's a double redundancy routine built in to the app, Sir. No more time wasted, checking The List. Not even once."

The old man scratched his beard. "Air to ground, you say?"

George clapped his hands with glee. He may have jumped up and down a little bit. "Yes! It's what all the big boys are using. Tried and tested. Solutions for the modern data-driven, process-related, holiday-oriented, just-in-time delivery operation. Says so on the box."

"But," his boss began, pausing to marshal his thoughts. "I don't understand how we're—"

"Cutting edge technology, boss," Murray jumped in. "You don't need to understand it when you've got us to work it out for you."

"That's not what I—"

But the rest of his sentence was drowned out by a four-part oratorio on the theme of how hard they had worked and how excited they were to try it and how sure they were it would work.

At last, the old man sighed. Even now he couldn't eliminate all traces of the genial chuckle that seemed lurked under all his

pronouncements. “You know,” he said. “I remember when paper was the cutting edge solution for data distributions. And you can still do yourself a nasty injury with that.”

Four sets of eyes entreated him from under four colorful stocking caps. George was jingling the bells on his shoes again. Murray looked like he might cry. Neither Ephraim or Midge blinked. (Then again, Ephraim rarely did.)

“All right,” the big man sighed. “I can see there’s no talking you out of this. Let’s load her up”

Stocking caps flew through the air like a rainbow fly-by. Murray squealed, George pushed Ephraim towards the dorms to summon the rest of the loading-crew, and Midge, all-business, bolted across the yard, keys to the storehouse in her hand.

The big man with the white beard sighed deeply. Reaching inside his scarlet coat, he pulled something out of a deeply recessed pocket and tucked it under the driver’s seat while none of them were watching.

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“Ready, dear?”

The old man, wrapped up in his warmest, faux-fur-trimmed overcoat and his vegan Smugg boots (TM), returned his wife’s smile.

“Well,” she said, checking her watch and bustling over to plant a kiss on her husband’s face. “Time for you to be off, I think. Here, I made you some gloves. Knitted some conductive thread into the fingertips so you can use that new smart phone Murray gave you.”

“Ah,” he said, taking them from her. “Told you about their plan for digitizing my list, did they?”

“They did.” She nodded. “At length.”

Husband and wife shared a long, eloquent look. She smiled again and handed him a silver Thermos. “Safe travels,” she said, patting his arm.

He grinned. “See you in a jiffy.”

*

So here they were, on the final approach to Christmas Island, and things were not going well. He tapped on the screen.

“I’m just getting a little spinny thing.”

“Maybe it’s your gloves.”

“It’s not the gloves. The gloves are fine. It’s the—“

“You have to be patient, sometimes it takes a while to connect.”

“It’s been a while.”

“It’s going to be fine,” Murray’s voice, already raised over the roaring of the wind, was gaining in pitch too. “Just give it to me. Sometimes it needs someone younger—” he slapped a mittened hand over his mouth, realizing what he’d started to say. The boss said nothing and mildly handed over the smart phone.

Midge, from up front, called out, “Approaching Kiritimati, also known as Christmas Island!”

Murray squeaked and pounded the screen of the phone. “Work!” He screamed at it.

George looked over his shoulder saying helpful things like “Maybe if you restart it?”. Ephraim hung over the side, watching the water come closer and closer as Midge edged them down towards the islands.

“Kiritimati, Murray?” The big man’s voice was urgent. “Do you have my list?”

“I...I...I...”

“Murray!” George jammed his cap harder onto his head. “We’ve got Christmas Island coming up. We need that list. We can’t have NOT have Christmas on Christmas Island!”

Murray tried all the usual engineer’s tricks: restarting the phone, swiping frantically and, of course, banging it against something hard. When he finally looked up, his face was a mask of horror.

They landed with a thump.

“Well,” said their boss. “Not to worry. It’s a small place. Hand me

the sack. I'm pretty sure I remember who gets what."

Ephraim heaved a sack over the side. There was a blur of red and then the big man was back.

"Right then, Tawara islands. On we go, Midge."

"Wait!" Murray's voice was high enough to shatter glass now. "I've got it! I just brought it up."

He handed the phone back to his boss as they left *terra firma* and shot out over the Pacific again.

"Nope." The big man said. "Nothing."

"What did you do?" George blanched when he saw the look on his boss's face. "Sorry, Sir" he muttered.

"Tawara Islands, next stop," Midge sang out from up front.

"Murray?"

Murray's mouth moved, though his eyes never left the blank screen. The wind whipped away whatever sounds he was making, in disdain.

"Murray?" The old man shouted over the trade winds. "Tawara's a problem, Murray. A few thousand Kiritimatans I can remember. Tens of thousands Tawarans is a bit more tricky. We're going to end up with little Towan getting little Tawindo's fish knife and whatnot, if we don't solve this soon." Suddenly, his hand shot out and caught Ephraim by his colorful hood just as the curious lad was about to topple over the side and down into the ocean below.

"Sea," Ephraim said, entranced.

"Quite."

As they came in range of Tawara, Murray let out a howl. "I'm sorry! I don't understand. It worked fine on our test flights over Seattle!"

"Land," Ephraim said.

"Indeed," their boss said, looking at Ephraim thoughtfully.

Murray was gibbering now. "I don't understand, I don't understand."

“Ephraim has it, I believe,” The old man said, not unkindly.

George snorted. “Anything Ephraim has, I don’t want!”

The big man ignored him. “You fitted an Air To Ground antenna, right? Which only makes sense if we are, like your friend Craggy’s planes, flying over land most of the time.”

“Land,” Murray repeated weakly.

“What we needed,” the old man said, leaning forwards, “And I did try to tell you this but you were so excited — Midge, reach under your seat would you, there’s a good girl — what we really needed was a KANDU.”

“Can-do?” George shrieked, pulling his stocking cap off his head and chewing on the edge of it. “Can do? We’re full of can-do attitude! We’re lousy with Can-Do! What else but Can-Do could make presents for all the world’s children AND deliver them all in one night? I’ll show you can-do.”

The old man had his eyes fixed on Midge, who was rooting around under the driver’s seat. “Not ‘can do’. KANDU — It’s an acronym. Ka/Ku — that’s satellite frequencies, Murray. The signal goes up to the satellite not down to the ground, Murray — Airline Network Data Unit. In other words, works over water.”

“Sea!” Ephraim shouted, pointing down.

“As you say, Ephraim. Sea.”

Murray was staring at a point somewhere over Midge’s left shoulder, trying to force his brain to accept all this new information it didn’t want to receive. George rammed his hat back on his head now but wasn’t looking much better for it. “How do you know so much about this stuff?” he yelled, over the rushing wind.

“Little Ricky Branson sent me a letter last year asking for one,” the old man smiled. “Told me all about it. He can be quite convincing, as I’m sure you remember...”

Murray, working quickly through the five stages of grief, had collapsed on the bench, his eyes rolling back in his head.

The old man looked at him for a long time. Then he seemed to reach a decision.

“Midge,” he shouted. “Did you find that thing?”

“Got it, sir!” Midge let the reins go a little slack, and shifted around in her seat. She held in one hand a tightly-rolled scroll of paper.

“Your list!” George made it sound like an accusation.

“Your list!” Murray said, as if was the answer to all his dreams come true at once.

“My list!” The boss raised his hand.

“We’re saved,” Murray said, dreamily.

The scroll arced through the warm, tropical air, towards the big man’s hand.

And missed.

Five faces watched in horror as The List, on good old paper—checked twice, rolled and stashed for emergencies—plunged down and down, into the port-dark sea.

“Sea,” Ephraim said sadly, as it fell.

*

Midge brought them in to land on North Tawara with the usual bump. George glared at the back of her head. It was all he seemed able to do. Murray had slid so far down on the bench that only the top of his stocking cap was visible.

“Whee!”

“Shut up, Ephraim,” three voices said in unison.

“Now, now,” said the big man. His usually rosy cheeks looked a little paler than usual, and there was a distinct lack of crinkles around his eyes.

“Sorry sir,” This was Murray. “Just getting a bit testy. I mean, we’re connected right now, but what are we going to do if the signal keeps dropping out over the sea?” His voice was flat. “Do you have any idea how many island chains there are in the world?”

“Tea!”

George glared at Ephraim and seemed about to tell him to pipe down, again, when the big man waved him off.

“No, he’s quite right. As the Missus is always saying, there’s nothing a nice cup of tea can’t fix. We’ll have a little sip and a little think, shall we? Pass me the thermos, Ephie?”

Ephraim grasped the thermos in two hands and shuffled heavily along the bench towards his boss. The big man took the flask and slowly unscrewed the cap, looking around at his crew. Good old practical Mitch had adjusted her hat, hopped out and begun to fuss with the ’deer. Murray was stabbing at the smartphone screen and muttering to himself words like “download” and “faster” and “please”. George had gone bug-eyed and was chewing on his cap’s pompom. Ephraim was, well, Ephraim.

The big man slowly unscrewed the lid of the flask. He took a deep breath.

Nothing.

No steam fogging into the humid tropical air.

No sweet-earthy aroma of brewed Indian foliage.

Just the faintest smell of...paper?

The big man peered inside the opening. The chuckle that started to build deep in the caverns of his ample, famous belly, was the sweetest sound that Murray and George, Ephraim and Mitch could ever have hoped to hear. It began as a tremor and built up through a series of foreshocks, to a full-blown mega-thrust laugh-quake with sonic boom.

“Ho! Ho! Ho!” It reached out and tickled everyone it touched until even the glum engineer Murray couldn’t stop the edges of his mouth from twitching upwards.

“Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho!”

“What? What is it?” George managed, choking back contagion-chuckles.

“Wonderful woman, my wife.” He turned the wide-mouthed flask upside down and gave it a couple of shakes. One more shake dislodged from its shiny depths a tightly-packed scroll of onion-skin paper, covered with columns and columns of names and addresses, and a cleverly coded key, cross-referencing sack, and present, and child.

The big man bellowed, clutching his wobbling belly and letting loose again. “Nothing a nice cup of tea can’t fix, indeed!”

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A trail of faux-fur-lined clothing led from the front door of the small, well-insulated house, through the kitchen and on into the family room. On one side of the hearth a plump, white-haired woman sat behind a hardback copy of a space-opera movie tie-in novel.

“This is rather good,” she said, from behind the book, which had been deemed too beaten-up to give away as a gift. (This was how she came across most of her reading material and accounted for her broad general knowledge and understanding of the human condition.) “Nice to see all those action figures you dropped off at young Chuck Wendig’s house over the years, didn’t go to waste.”

She looked up when her husband didn’t answer. On the other side of the hearth, her equally plump and white-haired spouse dozed, chin on his evenly-rising-and-falling chest. He snorted, mumbled something about a mojito, then settled back into an even breathing pattern again.

On the couch between them, curled up together like a litter of puppies, lay four smaller figures, all arms, colorful clothing and jingle bells.

It was almost time to eat. She knew the Tofurkey would get dry if she left it in the oven much longer. Still, maybe there was time for one more cup of tea and another chapter. Beside her, the weary travelers slept on, long into the dark arctic afternoon.

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I hope you enjoyed this seasonal silliness.
If you'd like to read about what the elves got up to last Christmas,
get your free story: Dreaming of A White Christmas here

<http://eepurl.com/CAgxP>

Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays
and all the best for the New Year!

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Julie Duffy". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with some loops and flourishes.