

The Man in Red

"Look, there he is!" Andy shouted to his sister.

Lynne dropped the beach ball and ran to the end of the short drive. The man in the red suit was now making his way between the chalets towards the football pitch.

"Come on, Lynne!" shouted Andy.

"We're just going to the playground, Dad," shouted Lynne.

"Okay, but don't speak to any strangers - and no more than half an hour. It's almost bed time."

Breathless, the two children arrived at the open space. Where had he gone? Lynne was shivering. The sea breeze was a little cool. But he wasn't going to let that bother him.

"There!" called Lynne suddenly.

She was pointing to the path which lead to the main road. That was him again - dressed all in red and making his way along the path which lead to the main road

"Come on. race you," shouted Andy.

But Lynne, as usual, slower and more clumsy than him, tripped over and fell, letting out a large wail as she collided with clump of stinging nettles.

"Oh, come on, Lynne." Andy gritted his teeth with frustration, and throwing a bunch of dock leaves at his howling little sister, he dashed on down to the gap in the hedge. He looked eagerly to the left and the right - but no sign. Blow! If they didn't get to speak to him soon, they'd never know. There were only three more days of the holiday left.

Andy turned and wondered back to where Lynne, now recovered, sitting at the side of the path. Andy was soon also going backwards and forwards and he began to feel more cheerful.

"Anyway, I don't suppose it is!" said Lynne, spitefully.

"Who else would wear red and white all the time? They're just not the in colours this year - in fact, they're the last colour any normal person would wear." retorted Andy, taking a sly look at his bright orange bermudas.

"I don't suppose at his age he's too bothered about fashion."

"And what about that long beard? No-one else would have a long white beard."

Lynne didn't have an answer for that one.

"Well, he's not fat enough anyway."

"Everyone goes on a diet for the summer holidays - and anyway, I bet he only looks that fat because he wears so many clothes under his big red coat."

"Anyway, where's he put the re.....?"

"Lynne! Andy!"

Andy sighed. "Come on. We'd better go. I suppose it's time for bed."

Andy could not get to sleep that night. He could not stop thinking about the man in red. It was all Dad's fault, when they had spotted him that night as they'd been sitting out of doors eating their dinner.

"Who does he think he is?" Dad had said as the man walked past their chalet with his wife.

They had both been wearing red and white track suits. The woman, grey-haired and slightly rounded, had reminded them all of grandma.

Yes," said Mum, "she certainly looks the sort I'd imagine him married to. Cuddly. She seems to have hurt her leg, though."

"Maybe they're not used to walking without snow," Dad had joked. "She probably slipped on the dry ground."

After that they had spotted the man and his wife several times. They had been wearing red and white every time. Otherwise, they looked like any other old people. And always they'd seemed to just disappear

into thin air. If only it were him - perhaps Andy could somehow talk to him and take some proof back home. That would show that Mark Hammond. Andy remembered him boasting last year.

"Oh I don't know about leaving mince pies out for Father Christmas. We actually got to see him. The real one that is. When we went to Lapland last year."

Everybody had been all over Mark after that. Andy so wanted to be liked by him. If only he could go home from this holiday with a story even more impressive than Mark's.

Andy must have got to sleep eventually, somehow, for the next day arrived and rather took him by surprise. It was not a brilliant day, but it was warm enough to swim.

"Get those jumpers on and then run around to get warm," Mum said as they got out of the water.

"Come on, Lynne," Andy shouted, grabbing the large blue and yellow beach ball.

The children bounced the ball backwards and forwards to each other as they ran along the firm brown sand. The salt air was lovely brushing against your cheeks and it was really exciting how the waves crashed down on to the beach. In his excitement, Andy grabbed the ball and gave it one almighty heave.

Oops! He'd done it again! The ball rose in a great loop and landed behind the hedge of one of the gardens which came right down to the beach.

"Oh great!" sneered Lynne. "We'd better go and see if we can get it back. The children rushed into the nearby lane. Andy spotted a gateway. He hoped there would be no-one in. His heart sank as he spotted the heads of two people who were sitting in the garden. Ah well, better get it over with. But as he went to open the gate, he came to a sudden standstill.

"Well, what now?" demanded Lynne irritably. "Oh."

There he was again, this time sitting in a deck-chair doing the crossword in a magazine and wearing a red T-shirt and white shorts. Andy's heart was beating furiously now. This might be his last chance. He must ask him, he simply must. But what if it wasn't him? Well, at least it would be settled. He would know once and for all.

Lynne poked him sharply in the ribs. "Are you going to go and get it back then or what?"

Andy took a deep breath. "I'm going to ask him," he said. "I've got to."

"Just get the ball and run back," Lynne wailed. "You know we mustn't speak to strangers."

Andy opened the gate and walked through boldly.

"I'm going to fetch Dad," shouted Lynne.

Andy marched up the path. Now he was trembling all over. "Can...can I please have my ball back?" he stammered.

The man in red looked up, startled. He seemed to not have noticed the ball. He shouted out something that sounded like "What?"

Andy's heart sank a little. Surely if this were him, he would understand and speak every language, including English. And would he be so grumpy? And yet, there was that long white beard.

The old man suddenly noticed the ball. He mumbled something, walked over to the ball a little reluctantly and handed it over to Andy. He then turned and said something angrily to his wife. The lady just laughed and said in a heavy foreign accent:

"Nikolai, they're only children!"

At that point a familiar adult voice boomed out.

"I do hope they are not bothering you."

Blow that pesky little sister. She'd gone and fetched Dad.

"It's alright. They're only children," the foreign lady repeated.

"Come on," said Dad. "Lunch, then mini-golf."

Pleasant as the thought of mini-golf was, Andy could not help being disappointed that he had not been able to ask that vital question. The mini-golf did turn out rather well, in fact. Not only did Andy get several holes in one but he had the lowest score of all, even lower than Dad's. Lynne sulked of course, because she couldn't get the ball into most of the holes even after ten goes. This made Andy feel even better, though. So it was quite a happy Andy who returned to the chalet at tea-time. But he was not happy for long,

for in front of their chalet sat the little old lady, wearing yet another red and white jumper. She had probably come to complain again about what had happened that morning.

"Good afternoon," said Dad. "I AM sorry about what happened this morning."

"No, it is I who is sorry. Nikolai not normally so bad-tempered. He like children really. But he been working very hard."

Andy could hold back no longer. "Is he really Father Christmas?"

"Father Christmas - who he?"

"The man who brings all the presents to the children at Christmas. He usually wears a great big red coat lined with white fur."

"Ah yes. Him!"

"And you see, you always wear red and white." Andy paused.

The woman looked at him intently.

"They're not the in colours this year...." Andy was beginning to feel a little foolish now.

Suddenly the woman's faced creased up and she started to laugh. It was the sort of laugh deep from the tummy which could have come from Santa himself. She laughed so much that she could not speak for a long time. "Oh, Nikolai would find that funny," she said, as she wiped the tears from her eyes. "Well, perhaps you is right, in a way. Nikolai does work hardest in the Winter, just like Santa. And he does work for children, but his work is very secret, so please tell no-one."

"Do tell me," said Dad, "so why do you both always wear red and white?"

"We are in Denmark and we always like to honour the country we are visiting."

Andy remembered that the Danish flag was red and white.

"Well, I must go now. I only wanted to repair the damage Nikolai had done. Tomorrow we go home. We must pack."

Everyone spent the evening trying to work out just what the old woman had meant. No-one really came up with an explanation that fitted. Andy couldn't sleep again. He went over and over everything that had happened and that had been said. None of it seemed to make any sense.

In the morning he awoke with a jump. It did all still fit! Working for children, busy in the Winter, secret..... Maybe the lady had meant that he should keep secret what he had found out. There was just one way to prove it.

Andy got dressed as quickly as he could. He grabbed a pen and a scrap of paper. Hastily he wrote a note, and then left the house, jumped on his bike and raced down to the chalet near the beach. The house looked deserted. The curtains were shut. He just hoped that this meant that they were still in bed asleep. Quickly he pushed the note through and left as fast as he could.

"That should do it," he thought. "Either I get a skate-board with "Coca Cola" written on it - shocking pink on one side and lime green on the other - or I give up believing in Father Christmas."

When Andy got back, there was just time for a quick breakfast and then everyone helped to load the car. One hour later they were leaving the holiday village. It was all a bit sad really. He and Lynne had really enjoyed the holiday in Denmark, and now there would be nothing to look forward to until Christmas. And even that would be ruined if he didn't get that skateboard.

As they approached the main exit they noticed that a small crowd had gathered. In between the excited comments from the people standing there, they could hear that deep familiar laugh. This time it was coming from two people.

"Look who it isn't," said Dad.

There he was, the man in red, balanced somewhat unsteadily on a skateboard. It was bright pink on one side. Andy couldn't see whether it was bright green on the other side, nor whether it had "Coca Cola" written on it, but he guessed it probably had.

"Goodness me, that's brave of him at his age," said Dad.

"You know what," said Andy. "I think Christmas is going to be really great this year."

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