

TOP TEN LIST

by Adam Sifre

It was only two days before Christmas. Jonathan remembered his mother crying. Even with his door shut and her bedroom at the other end of the hall, her sobbing had carried, as if they were playing some weird game of telephone, with an invisible string stretched taut from her bedroom to his. Before the crying, there had been the phone call, dreaded but not unexpected. Then the sobbing. Then... and then what?

Then I woke up here.

He was lying on some sort of cot. It wasn't exactly dark. There was a little light everywhere but no source of light anywhere. The air was cool and damp. And stale. Jonathan turned his head and saw other cots, all against the far wall of the room which appeared to curve in a long arc.

He'd awakened to a low, electric throb that seemed to be coming from the floor, felt as much as heard. His teeth vibrated in sympathy with the sound, like a tuning fork. The noise hadn't stopped since Jonathan had awoken, but his body had eventually developed an uneasy harmony with the vibrations, and he was able to more or less ignore it.

His head started to clear. Enough for Jonathan to realize he was terrified.

"Mom?"

It came out soft and raspy. His throat was dusty dry and made soft clicks when he tried to swallow.

"Mom?" A little louder this time. The word came back as a soft echo, and then a chorus of other pleas accompanied it.

"Hello?"

"Where am I?"

"Who's that?"

"Please. Please."

Jonathan struggled to sit up and get a real look around the room. He felt fuzzy and weak. The space was large and roughly circular. His first impression was that it was more of a cave than a room. The walls were natural stone and glistened with condensation. The air felt warm enough. A cave should be cold, so maybe it was real.

Several other cots were evenly spaced along the wall. Jonathan could see a child on or next to each cot, some sitting up, others lying down. He could make out few details in the dim light, but the others all looked to be around his age. Eleven, maybe twelve years-old.

In the center of the room, there was what looked to Jonathan like a large, horse drawn carriage, like something he might have seen in a stupid children's book or maybe a cartoon. Jonathan swallowed, making another soft 'clicking' sound. Except this carriage didn't look stupid. Mostly shadow, it looked black, menacing and strangely familiar.

Jonathan swung his legs onto the floor. There was a soft rattle. A thin iron chain manacled his foot to the bed. The chain was six or seven feet long. It allowed him to stretch and move a bit, but was far too short to reach any of the other children. The sound of metal dragging across the floor hissed throughout the room and he guessed the other kids were also chained. A small voice croaked from the cot on his left.

"I'm thirsty." It belonged to a girl. She wore a large t-shirt that came down to her knees. Her legs were bare and she was wearing slippers. "What is this place?"

Jonathan started to answer, but again it came out as a whispered rasp. He was parched and had to work up enough saliva to start talking. When he was finally able to speak, his voice came out thick and gritty.

"Don't know," he croaked. "How did you get here?"

"I -- I don't know. I remember being in bed. It was early. My dad had sent me to my room because.... Because I was fighting with my brother. I went to bed and then, and then I woke up here."

The girl sounded embarrassed and Jonathan thought maybe she wasn't telling him everything, but he didn't press it. Who cared why

some dumb girl was fighting with her brother? He gave a half-hearted tug on his chain. It was thin but strong enough.

"My name's Jonathan."

"I'm Susan."

"Susan. Listen, how long have you..."

Just then, a section of wall on the far end of the cave slid open and bright red light spilled into the room. Two children entered, both carrying buckets. They began making their way around the room, each walking in the opposite direction. They stopped at each cot and poured whatever was in their buckets into small bowls, handing them to each child. The two swayed from side to side as they walked, reminding him of Oompa Loompas in that dumbass movie. It was only when the one came to his cot that Jonathan realized they weren't children.

Dwarves?

The misshapen dwarf stood directly in front of Jonathan. He wore a filthy green robe and what looked like an old "dunce cap" straight out of an old cartoon. Its teeth were stained dark yellow/brown. Its eyes were hidden under long, matted hair. Jonathan could see a thin scar that ran from the left side of the dwarf's mouth to almost all the way up to his ear. The dwarf dipped a wooden ladle into his bucket and poured out a thick, yellowish liquid into a bowl.

"What's that?"

The dwarf placed the bowl on the floor and started walking to the next cot.

"Eggnog."

"I'm not going to drink that! Where's my mom! What's going on?" Jonathan shouted at the dwarf's back. The dwarf shuffled to the next court. He spoke without turning around.

"Everyone drinks it. If you don't drink it, we'll bleed you until your dead."

Jonathan sat on the cot, stunned. What was happening to him? How was chained to a cot in a cave that was not a cave, with a dwarf was threatening to murder him if he didn't drink eggnog?

In the end, they all drank the eggnog.

Sometime later the cave wall opened again and another dwarf entered the room. It might have been one of the dwarves that had poured the eggnog. It was wearing different rags — bright orange, otherwise looked exactly the same as the dwarf who had spoken to him. The dwarf shuffled into the center of the room and laboriously climbed onto the carriage.

Sleigh. It's a sleigh.

Jonathan's eyes had adjusted to the dark and now he could make out the running boards where wheels should have been. Something was propped up in the driver's seat. Jonathan couldn't be sure but it looked like a body.

The dwarf was grumbling and huffing a bit from the effort of climbing into the seat. He sat there for moment, catching his breath. He held a single piece of paper in his hand and seemed to be studying it. A second dwarf entered the cave and began collecting the bowls, checking to make sure each was empty.

While the bowls were collected, the dwarf in the carriage cleared his throat and stood on the sleigh's seat. He raised the paper in front of his face and began to read out loud.

"Vicky Ressler." Jonathan heard a girl's small yelp from somewhere in the room. "June 13, 2010. Poisoned the neighbor's cat. August 7, 2010. Teased Sally Feldman, saying her cat died 'from looking at her stupid face!'"

"I didn't!"

Ignoring her, the dwarf continued, "March 2, April 12, April 15, May 7 and 8, 2010. Skipped school to drink with friends."

Another squeak echoed off the walls. "How did...?"

"Susan Howard," the dwarf continued. Jonathan heard a soft gasp from the girl he had spoken with earlier. "December 14, 2010. Set younger brother's favorite stuffed animal — also known as 'Tigger' -- on fire." A short pause. "In his room, while he was sleeping"

"It was an accident..." Jonathan heard the lie in her words, even as she cried.

The dwarf read out all ten names, listing their offenses, including Jonathan's.

"Congratulations to you all. You are the top ten." He began to climb down from the sleigh, again not without some difficulty.

"It is December 24, 2011, 11:58 p.m. As it has always been, since before the great thaw -- damnit!" The dwarf's boot caught in the sleigh's runner and sent him sprawling to the ground.

"Godfuckingdamn sonofabitch shitass that hurts!"

The other dwarf looked up from collecting the last bowl. "Harry! It's almost time!"

The dwarf picked himself up and started running toward the door, still speaking.

"...Since before the great thaw," he huffed, "the wicked shall sacrifice and the spirit of Christmas shall dwell among us again! As it is written, there shall be --"

"It's midnight! It's midnight!" The other dwarf screamed.

"Bloody hell!" Harry didn't bother to finish his sentence. The door slammed behind him.

Jonathan tugged at his chains with renewed vigor. He didn't know what was going on here, but he knew he didn't want to find out. *How did they know about that night at Cliff's house? No one knew about that!* The things the other kids had done almost made him glad they were all chained to their beds.

They're crazy. I'm not like that. I'm going to get out of here. I'm going to get out of here and find mom. Things will be different. I promise. I'm going to get out —

"SILENT NIGHT, HOLY NIGHT..."

The music blared into the room. Jonathan instinctively hunched his shoulders against the audio onslaught. At the same time, the ceiling erupted in a riot of color as thousands of Christmas lights began blinking on and off.

Then the thing in the sleigh began to move.

With the crazy new light, Jonathan could clearly see it. A skull peeked out from a filthy, rust-stained hood. Torn, rust-blood rags hung loosely around its body.

*Except there isn't any body. Jonathan knew.
All bones. All skin and bones.*

The music was unbearable. Jonathan felt himself pushed back on the bed from the sheer force of it.

"ALL IS CALM, ALL IS BRIGHT"

Jonathan covered his ears and fell to his knees. The corpse was on the ground now. In one skeletal hand, it clutched what looked like an empty potato sack. He could see the thing's jawbone rising and falling, but if it was speaking, the words were more than lost in the ear-shattering music.

"YON YOUNG VIRGIN, MOTHER AND CHILD"

The thing started walking toward the other end of the room.

Thank you! Thank you!

Tears sprang from his eyes and Jonathan drew his knees to his chest and backed up against the bed. He watched the corpse shamble toward one of the children.

HOLY INFANT SO TENDER AND MILD"

It didn't run. It didn't slow. It came for the boy as sure and steady as time. The kid's mouth opened in a soundless scream, and then the corpse fell upon him. Jonathan saw it bury skeletal fingers in the kid's neck.

"Bryce Kaplan, November 23, 2010. Took mother's car. Crashed into neighbor's garage, hitting Mrs. Wilkenson, breaking her hip and collar bone."

The walls turned transparent. On the other side, Jonathan could see hundreds of dwarves jumping up and down, silently cheering.

But they're not dwarves. Not really. They're elves.

Blood sprayed from the boy named Bryce's neck. Then the corpse leaned in and bit. It bit and it chewed and it drank and it bit, until Bryce was a puddle.

"SLEEP IN HEAVENLY PEACE."

The corpse, dressed now in clean rags more the color of blood than rust and looking slightly bloated, moved on. The potato sack

was red velvet now, with white, wolf fur trim. And it wasn't empty. Jonathan could see there was some weight to it.

It was a long night. A long feast. By the time the thing visited Jonathan, its blood stained teeth were framed in a snow white beard, and Jolly ole' Saint Nick was nearly filled with the Christmas spirit.

If Jonathon screamed, no one heard it.

After, when all the presents were delivered to all the good little girls and boys, and all the cookies eaten, Santa returned with his sleigh and the elves set upon him with their small carving knives. There was another great feast and by mid-afternoon, the only thing in Santa's sleigh was a skeleton dressed in blood-rust rags.

The End.

