

When Santa Lost His Reindeer

A Story for Children of all Ages
by Guy Dauncey



It was a week before Christmas, and Santa was busy polishing his boots in the big Winter House, up at the North Pole. It was a pleasant evening, and he was feeling good about life.

"My, don't these boots look good!" he said to himself as he sat in front of the big log fire, admiring his reflection in the polish. "That should make a show when I'm ready to do my rounds!"

Most of the presents were neatly stacked in the Store House ready for delivery, and the reindeer were asleep in the barn, resting up before the big journey.

All except one, that is - Binky.

Binky was a mischievous young reindeer who was full of energy and ideas - way too many ideas for such a young reindeer.

Binky wanted to take the other reindeer up to the Moon - but they said it was too far.

She wanted to take them to visit the Sun - but they said it would be too hot.

Above all, she wanted to take them to the Magic Gardens of Greenland - but they laughed at her, and said, "There aren't any gardens in Greenland - that's just a fairy-tale. It's all ice and snow in Greenland, just like it is here! Pooh, Binky! You're such a silly reindeer. Who ever heard of gardens in Greenland - what a silly idea!"

Even Rudolf, the chief reindeer, thought it was a silly story. And he was an old, old reindeer.

For a day or two, Binky would go around with her head hanging down, feeling sad and sorry for herself - but she would soon perk up again. After all, she was a young and mischievous reindeer. She was *sure* her great-aunt Gwendolyn Reindeer had told her a story about the Magic Gardens of Greenland - and she was *sure* she wasn't making it up.

So while Santa was admiring his shiny black boots and warming his big bottom in front of the fire, Binky was lying awake in the barn, thinking about those gardens in Greenland.

"They must have magic waterfalls!" she thought, "and little ponds with goldfish in them! And great trees, covered in leaves - and flowers of every colour you could think of!" She was so excited, just thinking about it. "I bet they have magic paths you can wander down - and grasses of every flavour. Oh, how much I want to eat some lovely fresh grass, instead of this dried-up hay, and these miserable dried lichens we have to scrape off the rocks. They hurt my tongue! How can he expect us to work all night delivering presents to children all over the world if all we get to eat is dried hay and miserable lichens? I want to go to Greenland. I *do* want to go to Greenland!"

Poor Binky. The other reindeer all thought she was weird. They laughed at her, and turned up their noses. "Binky wants to eat grass in Greenland!!!" they said, in silly voices.

But this night, Binky was determined to find the way to Greenland - and to take all the other reindeer with her. If they didn't come too, how would they believe her when she came back and told them about the garden? But how? Oh dear - it was such a problem. Oh reindeer!

"Reindeer...Rein...deer." Binky was thinking very hard - so hard, her furry antlers were aching. Yes, girl reindeer have antlers, too. "Rein...deer ... deer who play in the rain ... but rain is so nasty and wet, not nearly as nice as snow ... but when it freezes, the rain turns into ice ... and the ice is so slippery ... and there's that big patch of ice behind the Store House where Grandpa Santa told us never to play, in case we slipped right away ... I *wonder* ... I *wonder*"

Binky crept out of the barn as quietly as she could, so as not to wake the other reindeer. She was going to look at the ice. She *had* to look at the ice!

She shut the barn door very quietly behind her, and trotted over to the big Store House where the Christmas presents were stored. Then she jumped over the wooden fence Grandpa Santa had put up to keep them out - what a silly idea! - and walked around to the back of the Store House.

Then all of a sudden - whoops! - she stepped on something really slippery and before she knew it she was sliding away downhill, gaining speed as she slid. "Help!" she cried out - but there was no-one there to hear. Then suddenly she saw a bend coming up, and as she

went round the corner she made an especially big leap and managed to jump off the ice, just in time to save herself.

But as she stood on the bank of the ice-river, looking down to where it was flowing away, ever faster, she heard a voice in her head singing "Greenland! Greenland!" and she just *knew* that this was the way to Greenland.

As she walked back to the barn, she was thinking, and then thinking some more - and then thinking even some more. My, how her head hurt! So that was the way to Greenland - but how was she going to persuade the other reindeer to join him? They didn't believe in Greenland, or the Magic Gardens. Maybe she could trick them by telling them she'd found some juicy fresh lichens behind the Store House. Would they believe that? Well, maybe they would! After all, they were all fed up with eating dried old hay and dried old lichens left over from last summer. What reindeer can resist the thought of juicy fresh lichen in the middle of winter?

So Binky ran back to the barn and made all sorts of reindeer noises, saying "Wake up! Wake up! I've found some fresh lichen! *Fresh* lichen! It's delicious!"

And when they woke up, they said "Where?" and she said, "Behind the Store House, where Grandpa Santa said we should never go! I'll bet that's why he won't let us go there! He wants to keep it all for himself!"

Now if there is one thing that gets a reindeer even more excited than the thought of fresh lichen, it is the thought that someone in the Santa family might be hiding fresh lichen from them. They had heard a rumour that the Santa family collected fresh lichen to make a delicious soup. So it must be true, after all!

As quickly as they could get up, the reindeer rushed out of the barn and over to the Store House. Even Rudolf joined in - he wasn't going to miss a tasty meal of fresh lichen, if that's what this was all about. Binky jumped over the fence, shouting "Here!" and then she quickly jumped to one side to avoid the ice. The other reindeer followed her without thinking, and slip! Before they knew it, they were sliding down the ice-river, with Binky jumping on behind.

"Greenland! We're going to Greenland!" she shouted to herself inside her head.

The other reindeer were too surprised to know what to think. In a flash, they passed the bend in the ice-river where Binky had jumped off, and as the river straightened out they slid faster and faster and faster.

"Wow! This is fun!" the young reindeer thought, as they slid past glaciers and great big ice-mountains. Two polar bears watched them go by from a snow-covered hilltop as they rushed away towards the south, and an arctic hare woke up from her underground sleep, surprised by the unexpected noise as the reindeer slid by.

They slid for almost the whole night, until it began to grow light. The reindeer were very surprised, because at the North Pole there was no light at all in the middle of winter. Days and nights were all the same, and they only knew when to get up and when to go to bed because Mrs. Santa came out and told them.

"Where are we?" they called out, as it began to grow light.

"Greenland!" Binky answered. "We're going to Greenland!"

Just as she answered they saw a big mountain appear in front of them, unlike any mountain they had seen before. As they watched, the ice-river began to slow, until it left them standing on the shore of this strange new land.

"Greenland?" the reindeer all asked, in a very surprised voice. "Greenland?"

"Yes, yes!" Binky replied. "I'm sure it's Greenland. Let's go and explore!" and she led them off the ice and onto the land.

By now some of the young reindeer were quite excited. They thought this was a tremendous adventure, and they had started looking up to Binky as their leader.

"Look - there's a kind of path!" Miranda reindeer called out. "Let's follow it!"

So with Miranda and the other young reindeer leading, and Rudolf and the older reindeer following nervously from behind, they trotted up the path and disappeared into a forest.

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Meanwhile, back at the North Pole, Santa Claus, Mrs. Santa, the elves and the whole Santa family were waking up, ready for another day. There would be children's letters to read, presents to choose, and then all the work of wrapping them, keeping them separate and carefully listed so that nothing got mixed or muddled. It was a lot of work! But the Santa family loved it. This was the very best time of the year - the days before Christmas.

After breakfast, Mrs. Santa went over to the barn to feed the reindeer. As she approached the barn, she had a terrible shock - the barn door was open, and all the reindeer were gone! Gone!

She could see the hoof-prints where they had left the barn, and she quickly followed them over to the Store House. Then she saw the hoof-prints run up to the fence and re-appear on the other side.

"Oh my dear!" she said to herself, they must have jumped over the fence and disappeared down the ice-river! This is *terrible!* Whatever can we do? There's no way back from down the river, and it's only six days till Christmas! Whatever are we going to do?"

Back at the house, when Mrs. Santa returned with the news that all the reindeer had gotten out in the night and disappeared down the river of ice, Santa was completely beside himself.

"This is *terrible!*" he said, pulling on his beard with both his hands. "In all the years we have been delivering presents, we have *never* missed a year. *Never!* What *are* we going to do?"

"What *can* we do?" Mrs. Santa replied. "They've gone down the ice-river! No-one has ever returned from going down the ice-river! That's why Grandpa Santa fenced it off and told the reindeer never to go near it! You remember Rudolf's brother, Rimsky? He disappeared down the ice-river years and years ago, and he never came back!"

"Oh, please!" Santa cried, and started snuffling into his big red handkerchief. "Don't *ever* mention Rimsky. He was such a lovely reindeer. Next to Rudolf, he was my most favorite reindeer!" Santa started crying, and the tears ran all the way down his beard and into his breakfast cereal. "Oh dear, oh reindeer," he cried. "What *ARE* we going to do?"

The whole morning passed in this way. Santa felt so miserable that he didn't feel at all like packing up the presents. Even the elves felt miserable. Every time Santa read a letter, from a little girl in New York who wanted Santa to find a nice warm home for all the people who had to sleep on the streets, or from a boy in Paris who wanted a toy rocket big enough fly him to the top of the Eiffel Tower, he broke down in tears, thinking that he would not be able to make any of them happy. In fact, he thought, it was far worse than that - far, far worse. The terrible truth was, without his reindeer, he would actually make all the children who had written to him most awfully *unhappy*, because they would go to bed expecting Santa to deliver their presents and they would wake up in the morning, and - oh - this was so terrible! This was awful! *They would have no presents at all!*

Luckily, Mrs. Santa was more practical.

"Look! It's no good you sitting around like that moping into your beard. That won't get us anywhere. We'll just have to hope that a miracle happens somehow, and they'll all come back just in time. So meanwhile, you get off your big backside and start packing up these presents. It's bad enough losing the reindeer without you turning the place into an ice-rink with all your tears. So come on - pull yourself out of it!"

So Santa and Mrs. Santa, with help from the elves and all the Santa family relatives, continued to read the letters, wrap the presents, and stack them in order. Read, wrap, stack. Read, wrap, stack. But it was all so miserable! And every so often, Santa would disappear off to the bedroom to have a big cry. It was not a happy Christmastime, not at all.

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A long day's slide away, down at the end of the ice-river, Binky, Miranda and all the other reindeer were exploring their way through the forest. They had never been in a forest before - though Rudolf swore that according to his mother, his great aunt Jemimah had once told her a story about travelling to a place just like this, and finding some kind of magic garden.

"But Rudolf!" Binky said, when Rudolf told them the story, "You swore there was no such place! You were lying! You never told me!"

"Now now, young woman," Rudolf replied, in a sweet-tempered voice. "I never told any lies. If you remember, I just said nothing - nothing at all! I just didn't want you getting us into any kind of trouble! And now look where we are! Miles away from home, and only five days till Christmas! And how are we going to get home? I'll bet you never thought about that. Only five days to Christmas, with all those presents to deliver, and here we are, lost in the middle of nowhere. You could at least have chosen summer to make this kind of journey. I don't know - you young reindeer, you're all the same."

None-the-less, there was a twinkle in Rudolf's eyes, as if, well, as if he wasn't *too* upset to be undertaking an adventure as big as this. Maybe even Rudolf got fed up with old hay and half-dead dried lichens, Binky thought, and was happy to have a change.

After a while the forest began to thin out and they came to a large green field that spread as far as the eye could see.

"Greenland! This must be Greenland!" Miranda shouted. By now, the other young reindeer thought Binky was a genius. "Where's the Magic Garden?" Miranda asked.

Binky looked out across the field. It was awfully big. In fact, it seemed to go on for ever! She began to feel rather disappointed.

Just then, however, there was a squeal of pleasure from one of the older female reindeer, who had been nibbling at the grass.

"Taste the grass!" she shouted. "Taste the grass!"

Everyone started eating, and sure enough, the grass tasted *wonderful*. It was so soft, fresh and sweet, like nothing they had ever tasted before.

And then Binky looked up, and when she looked back towards the forest she saw an apple tree in full bloom, covered in tiny pink flowers - and some brightly coloured birds with great long tails, flying in and out of the trees.

"Look! Look!" she cried, and everyone turned to look at the forest, which had changed from the dark, quiet forest they had arrived through and was now full of colour and movement.

"But that's *beautiful!*" Miranda squealed. "I've never seen anything so beautiful! Let's go and play in it!"

And without delay, the reindeer all ran over to the forest.

It was truly magical. In all his long years, Rudolf had never dreamed of anything quite like it - and when you are eating your way through endless piles of stale hay, the same every day, you do tend to dream a bit sometimes.

There were coloured birds of every description, and bushes covered in huge green leaves, and flowers of every shape and size. There were huge red flowers, and tiny blue ones, and flowers with a hundred tiny flowers all clustered up the stem, and flowers with just one big beautiful blossom, smelling more fragrant than the freshest summer lichen they had ever tasted. So Binky had been right! There *was* a Magic Garden!

For three days, the reindeer wandered among the trees, eating the grass, nibbling on the flowers and sleeping in the sun. Surely, old Agnes reindeer thought, she must have died and gone to reindeer heaven. In all her sixty years of reindeer living, she had never known anywhere quite so beautiful.

On the fourth day, however, Rudolf came up to Binky, and beckoned her away for a short talk.

"Binky," he said, "This is certainly all very lovely, and it was most clever of you to trick us into coming - but it is only two days until Christmas, and really, it is time we should be getting back. After all, if we're not there to deliver the Christmas presents, how will Santa manage? He'll never be able to deliver them on his own."

Binky blinked. Christmas? Oh my goodness, she thought, so it is. She had only imagined that they would be away for a day or so. It had never crossed her mind that they might not be home for Christmas. But where was the way home?

"Bu...bu...but Rudolf," she said, rather nervously, feeling a bit foolish, "I d...d...don't know how to get home. The ice-river brought us here. And it only seemed to flow one way. What are we going to do?"

"Oh dear," Rudolf thought. "In fact, I shall say, oh reindeer. Now we *are* in a pickle. We'll have to call everyone together and see if anyone has any ideas."

So together, Rudolf and Binky spent the afternoon wandering through the forest finding all the scattered reindeer, telling them to meet by the big pond for a very important meeting that evening. Some of the reindeer were lying in the sun, asleep on their backs with their legs in the air. Some were bathing in a beautiful lake they had discovered. Several of the younger reindeer had fallen in love, and were smooching and canoodling with each other in quiet places. It was all very difficult to find everyone, but eventually by evening all the reindeer had gathered by the pond.

Rudolf cleared his throat, ready to speak.

"My friends, my fellow reindeer. We owe a great apology to our young friend Binky, for all the many times we laughed at her and said unkind and unpleasant things. I am very sorry, Binky. Please accept my apologies. I must apologize too, for even though my mother once told me that her great aunt Jemimah had told her stories about some kind of a magic forest, I didn't believe her, and I chose not to believe anything Binky was saying either - and by not saying anything, I encouraged you all to tease her and say unkind things. So, Binky was right. This is truly a wonderful, magical place.

"But the truth is, my friends," he went on, "that lovely as this is, it is only two days until Christmas, and without us, Santa will not be able to deliver any of his presents."

From all over the herd, there were murmurs and shouts of distress. "Oh! Oh!" the reindeer cried, as they began to realize their situation. "What are we going to do?" they all asked at once. "How are we going to get home?"

"Well," old Rudolf continued, "it seems we have a problem. Neither Binky nor I have any idea how to return. Not at all. We were rather hoping that one of you might have found the way home."

There was silence throughout the herd. Not a sound was made, not even a neigh, as the herd waited, hoping that someone would speak up with the answer.

But no, there was not an answer. And as they waited, the true awfulness of their situation sank in. Tomorrow would be Christmas Eve, and by tomorrow night they had to be winging their way around the world, carrying Santa and his sacks of presents to all the world's children. There had never been a Christmas without Santa, and without presents. It was unthinkable! But what were they to do?

But just then, just as they were beginning to lose hope of ever finding an answer, or a way back home, there was a stirring at the back of the herd. The younger reindeer moved aside, and through the herd there came a very old reindeer they had never seen before. His hair was grey, and his antlers were the most magnificent they had ever seen - bigger even than Rudolf's. There was complete silence as he made his way through the herd.

When Rudolf saw this old grey reindeer he felt a funny shudder go all the way down his spine, making his tail shake with an ancient, long-lost feeling he hadn't felt for years. Could it be? No, surely not - but wait, could it be? Could it be? Why, yes, it was ... it was Rimsky, his long-lost brother!

"Rimsky!" he roared. "Rimsky - it's you! You old devil! How can it be ... What are you doing here? This is amazing!"

And as the herd watched, Rudolf and Rimsky broke into a wild excited dance, prancing up against each other, clashing antlers, scuffing the ground, and behaving in a totally childlike way.

Eventually they calmed down and turned to face the herd. Rimsky cleared his throat, and he began to speak with a very low, gruff voice.

"My friends," he said, "it is so wonderful to see you all. I have been living here alone for over twenty years, and I thought I would never see you again, let alone play with my brother Rudolf. This is indeed a miracle. I have so many stories to tell, but for those you must wait, because I have listened to your concerns, and I believe I know the way home."

There was absolute silence as the herd gazed in amazement at this venerable old reindeer, waiting to see what he would say.

"When I first came here I was so excited that I fell in love with this paradise, I forgot all sense of time. After a while, I realized that I must have missed Christmas, and to tell the truth, I was too ashamed to return, even though I had long since been told what I think is the way home. For a reindeer to miss Christmas is such a terrible thing, and I could never find the courage to go back and face you all, so I thought it best to stay here, and hope that in time, you would forget me. I have had my sadnesses, but this is such a magical place that I have made many new friends, so I have not lived an entirely unhappy life."

"But now it is time to return, both for me and for all of us. A long time ago, a bluebird told me that a long way to the north there is a river made from ice that flows towards the north. She said that according to the old birds' tales, which have been passed down over years and years, the ice-river leads directly to the North Pole. If this is true, it is our only hope. But we must leave immediately! If we travel all night, we might just get back in time. But there's no time to waste! Binky, Miranda? Will you come with me at the front? Rudolf - will you take up the rear, to make sure we don't lose anyone in the forest? It gets very dark, and it is easy to lose your way."

So the herd of reindeer travelled all through the night, and as dawn approached they came to the banks of a flowing river of ice, just as the bluebird had said.

"Come on!" Rimsky said. "There's no time to waste!" - and he jumped onto the ice, followed by the rest of the herd, with Rudolf jumping on at the end.

The ice was soon moving very fast, just as it had on their journey down, and as they travelled north the sun disappeared from view so that they were travelling in complete darkness. Only the stars were there to give light, and as the reindeer rested on the ice, tired after their long trek through the forest, they marveled at how many stars there were scattered across the sky, twinkling as they shone, and they felt excited at the thought of returning home.

The ice-river carried them on for hours and hours until finally, it began to slow. Rudolf stood up, and looked around. With difficulty, he made his way to the front, taking great care on the slippery ice. The stars seemed to be in the right place, which told him they must be very close to home. And then, as the ice slowed still more, he saw a light on the horizon.

"Look, everyone!" he shouted. "Look! We're home!"

"We're home! We're home!" everyone shouted, and without delay they leapt off the ice and started galloping across the snow.

All except Rimsky. He stepped off the ice-river, but then he paused and hung his head.

"What's up, old brother?" Rudolf asked. "Come on - we're home! Everyone will be delighted to see you!"

"I can't," old Rimsky said. "I'm too ashamed. I have missed - oh, I don't know how many Christmases. I can't go back now, and just walk in as if nothing had happened. I'd rather die here, or just disappear off into the snow. You go on without me, my brother. I'm old now. I've had my day."

"What nonsense!" Rudolf replied. "Why, you old scoundrel! First, you go off and have a great old time, living in clover with every flavour of sweet grass around you for twenty years, and then you threaten to disappear again without telling us your stories? No! There's no way you're disappearing. And what's more - you're coming with us, tonight, when we all go out with Santa! I love you, Rimsky - and you're coming with us!"

Rimsky did not have the strength to argue, so slowly, he and Rudolf walked towards the lights of the houses.

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Back at the big house, Santa was feeling as low as he had ever felt in his whole life. Luckily for him, Mrs. Santa, the elves and the rest of the Santa family had buckled down and got the remaining presents wrapped and stacked, just in case there was a miracle, as Mrs. Santa had said there might be. Poor old Santa, she thought to herself. After all, it's not we who will have to reply to all the children's letters, and explain why they didn't have any presents. He must feel awful. But there's nothing to be done for it. If there *was* a miracle, and we hadn't got any presents wrapped, then what would we do? Always look on the bright side, I say. It's better than looking on the dark side!

But just then, there was a great noise and a racket outside the door.

As quick as she could fly, Mrs. Santa ran to the door and flung it open.

"Goodness be to heaven," she cried. "They're home! Santa! Santa! Come quickly! They're home!"

And sure enough, there they were, prancing and dancing in the snow, as excited as could be, so happy you could see them laughing. Santa and Mrs. Santa, along with the elves and all the Santa family poured out onto the snow, and oh my, how they hugged their reindeer. What a relief! How pleased they were to see them!

But then Santa suddenly stood up and said, "Where's Rudolf? Is he here too? Where's Rudolf?"

Everyone looked around, but Rudolf was nowhere to be seen.

And then out in the darkness, some distance away, they saw not one, but two elderly reindeer, walking slowly towards them through the snow.

Santa and Mrs. Santa strained their eyes to see who it was, and then they looked around the herd to see who was missing. No, there was no-one missing - they were all there, except Rudolf. So who was this? Who *was* it?

It was then that Santa saw - and understood. It was - no, it couldn't be - but yes, it was Rimsky, his long lost reindeer.

"RIMSKY!!" he roared at the very top of his voice, and went charging off across the snow faster than if all the reindeer had been pulling him. "Rimsky! It's you! You're home!"

From the house, the elves, the Santa family and all the other reindeer watched as Santa ran up to Rimsky and threw himself at him, hugging him round the neck, kissing him all over. At first, Rimsky did not know how to respond - he was still feeling ashamed for having missed so many Christmases. But then slowly he looked up, looked Santa in the eye, and when he saw how happy Santa was he began to cry large, slow tears, which rolled down his fur, turning into ice. Then he started to nuzzle Santa, and his tears flowed until they were all done, and he could look Santa in the eye, and know how thoroughly, how happily, he had come home. Then Santa jumped on his back and they all rode back to the house, through the neighing and the cheering reindeer.

That night they had the greatest of celebrations, and everyone - all the reindeer, Rudolf, Rimsky, Binky, Miranda, Agnes, Santa, Mrs. Santa, the elves and the whole Santa family - were as happy as they could ever remember.

And after they had celebrated, and then rested, they took off for the one greatest journey of the year, the one greater than all other journeys, the journey of Christmas. And all around the world, the little children, who were safe and snug in their beds, would have their presents after all.

And as for Binky, she was the happiest and proudest reindeer of them all.

There *was* a Greenland, she thought to himself, as she rode through the night sky with Rudolf, Rimsky and all the other reindeer, carrying presents to all the children around the world.

And there *was* a Magic Garden.

The End

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