

Black Peter

By Marty Young

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Mrs Emmerson remained standing after Tom Wilson, chief of police, had finished yelling at the crowd. Her cheeks were red and getting redder every second. Her jewellery sparkled beneath the harsh lights of the town's old meeting hall.

"I saw what took that other boy," she said in a wobbly voice as all sixty-four people turned to stare. "Dane Gelder, I saw what took him."

"You saw-?" Chief Wilson looked as stunned as he sounded.

"That was four days ago!" shouted an angry voice.

"Why the hell didn't you say something sooner?" screamed another.

"Because no one would believe me!" Mrs Emmerson countered. "Whatever it was, it didn't walk away. It didn't jump into a car and drive off. It forced that boy into a sack and sank into the ground! I thought I was seeing things."

Nine-year-old Sam Wilson, sitting in the front row to be as close to his dad as possible, felt his stomach clench. The thing had taken Dane and Caleb and the other three boys and it would be back for more; that was the rumour all over school. But it was one thing hearing Tommy Jackson whispering about a demon that ate children, or Phillip Lucas

saying Santa had gone crazy and was getting his revenge. Hearing grown-ups talk about it was something else altogether.

"Ah, t'hell in a handcart!" Jefferson Richards' booming voice startled Sam. "I'll not waste any more of my time listenin' to this cockamamie." The old man stood and pointed a crooked finger at Chief Wilson as Mrs Emmerson took her seat. "Kids are goin' missing, and you want to sit here talkin' gibberish? Ain't there enough of these goddamn stories doin' the rounds? You should be out there hunting this bastard down b'fore he ruins Christmas for everyone!"

"What the hell do you think we've been doing?" Sam's dad fired back. "You think we're just kicking back drinking coffee?"

"Ain't too sure sometimes, t'tell the truth."

People were arguing down the back of the hall too, their voices growing louder till even Sam's dad and Mr Richards were forced to quit their bickering and pay attention.

Sam couldn't see through the rows of people, but he knew who was causing the disturbance. Caleb's dad, Mr Sassan, and his Dutch friends had taken up seats at the back of the hall when they had come in. The whole town had watched them enter. Not everyone had been pleased they were here, either. Jefferson Richards had said, "A town meetin' don't mean them!"

But then, he always had something to say.

"Something you want to share, Joep?" Chief Wilson asked from the stage.

The voices died out when those down the back realised

the town was staring. There was only a small Dutch community in Morisset, but they were a proud and close group with an impact far greater than their size would indicate. They got together every weekend at the new Dutch club on Jameson Street to dance and sing; Sam remembered how many angry people had knocked on their door the day that sign had gone up.

Many of those same angry people were here now, staring at Joep Sassan as he pushed back his chair and slowly stood.

"Joep, don't. It will only make things worse," said another of the Dutch men, someone Sam didn't know, but Joep indicated for that man to be quiet.

"Chief," Joep begun, hesitantly. "What the lady was speaking of..."

"Here we go," Jefferson Richards mumbled loud enough for all to hear.

"It sounds to us like Black Peter."

"Black who?" Sam could hear the weariness in his dad's voice.

"Black Peter--Zwarte Piet. He is a legend, an old Dutch legend." Joep's bald head glistened under those lights. "The stories we are hearing, they are very familiar. It's Zwarte Piet people are describing."

"What?"

"They'd arrive by steamboat in the old country every November the 15th--St Nicholas and his companions--and we would celebrate. They would tour the country, stopping at towns and handing out presents. That was St Nicholas's task. Black Peter would give coal to the bad."

"You ol' coot! Have you heard anyone here complaining about getting *coal*?"

"In some tales," Joep continued, ignoring Jefferson Richards' interjection, "Zwarte Piet put the naughty children into his sack and took them away. Some of the stories about town..."

Sam could hardly breathe. He looked at his dad up there on the stage. As soon as they got home he'd confess. If he said sorry and if he returned the game he and Caleb had stolen first thing tomorrow, maybe that faceless shadow would let Caleb go.

Better yet, maybe it wouldn't come for him. That thought surfaced too. Bold and bright, flashing its neon warning across his mind.

"Aw, this is bull," Richards growled. "Bull-fucking-shit! You're on the dope. This whole town's on the dope!"

There was more commotion from the back of the hall, chair legs scraping against the floor and angry retaliating voices. Sam turned in time to see Rinus van Dyke rising from the seat to Joep's left, creeping slowly to his feet in a way that signaled trouble was coming--big fat trouble barreling on like the coal trains that screeched through town each night at twelve. Rinus spoke with as thick an accent as Mr Sassan; his voice was as disturbing as those midnight trains. "My friend, you would do well to listen. The world is not always as it seems."

"I ain't your friend, you goddamn Dutch bastard!"

"And don't go bringing your bloody foreign folk stories to our town!" someone else called out. "Leave them in your

own country where they belong!"

A chorus of agreement rose to fill the front half of the hall.

"Please everyone, settle down!" The chief said, but Rinus van Dyke only spoke louder.

"In my country, Sinterklaas is about compassion! It is about giving. But here, your Santa Claus is about consumption. There is no soul to it! It is commercial, money-driven, soulless! And that is why you suffer. That is why you will always suffer."

"It sounds to me," said Jefferson Richards, puffing out his chest and standing to make sure the whole room could see him, "that you know too much about what's been going on around here."

"What are you implying?" Rinus van Dyke glared at the old man, and Richards raised his hands in mock innocence.

"Ain't implying nothing. Just stating the facts as we all see 'em."

After that, there really wasn't any reason to continue, not unless the chief of police planned on handing out boxing gloves and getting Sam to ring a bell every three minutes.

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Outside, the wind swept over the corrugated iron roof of the old meeting hall, searching for a way in, a nail it could pry loose, a rusting corner to peel away. Then, frustrated, it howled along the gutters and wailed down the drainpipes.

But it didn't go far; it eddied and swirled in the carpark, whipping up leaves and dirt and throwing them at

the cars.

As the front doors opened and the hall began to empty, the wind settled down, to wait.

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An hour later they were back at home, parked up in their driveway, but Sam couldn't shake the feeling that trouble had followed them. He stared out the window and felt like a stranger in his own neighbourhood; the low clouds and blustery wind, the shifting shadows--it all felt . . . wrong.

Different, somehow.

More like winter than the baking days of Christmas he knew.

It would be dark soon too. The sun had nearly set and the light was already starting to fade. Sam wondered with dread what this night would bring. He looked over at his dad. It had been frightening watching him lose control the way he had tonight. Like someone had snuck kryptonite into the hall to drain away his powers. When they had finally made it to their car after the meeting had erupted for the last time, his dad's exhaustion had only added to Sam's worries. If he'd known how to drive, he would've, just so his dad could rest.

And he would have driven them far away from here.

They sat in their driveway, gathering strength from the rumbling engine. Neither of them spoke, but that was okay; Sam didn't feel like talking, and he didn't think his dad did either.

Eventually, with a deep breath, one that Sam copied, his

dad turned off the motor. "C'mon, son," he said, opening his door. "Let's go inside."

Sam stuck close to his dad. He glanced back as he went up the porch steps; the cruiser sat there, silent and dark, ready to go. It looked like it wanted to go, like parked here doing nothing was a waste of its time.

Maybe it wanted to head on out of town too.

Behind the car, the trees out front of the Edmunds' house across the road were singing and dancing with their shadows.

Sam shivered. He hurried inside, glancing once at the green plastic Christmas wreath before locking it outside with the cold wind.

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Fifteen minutes later, a knock at the front door made Sam flinch. He looked across the kitchen table at his dad.

"I guess we knew this was coming, didn't we?" Chief Wilson said. He stared once more at his cup of coffee before hauling himself from his seat. The coffee—his second—was black and strong, the aroma filling the house. Under the bright kitchen lights, the chief of police looked like a ghoul, like a creature from one of Sam's black and white comics.

"Dad—"

"Stay there, Sam."

It was now two weeks since the first boy had gone missing. Fourteen days of mounting tension and growing fear, of upset parents knocking on the door, phone calls and meetings with deputies, social workers and the town mayor,

but there were still no answers. Only more crazy stories. Things that couldn't possibly be true.

He heard his dad unlock the door, then: "Tom, we need to talk."

Sam recognized the voice immediately and went out into the hall. Caleb's dad stood on the doorstep, wringing his hands, and Sam felt so terribly sorry for him. Joep Sassan had looked like Santa Claus in the newspaper last month, his big smile shining away on the front page for all to see. Sinterklaas is our way of uniting the town, the caption under the photo had said. Something long overdue. But now his son was gone and there were people like Mr Richards blaming him for all the kidnappings. It didn't seem like Christmas anymore, not any kind of Christmas.

"Joep, I wasn't expecting you," his dad said. "I thought it'd be someone else." He stepped aside and welcomed the old Dutchman in, but Joep didn't go beyond the hallway. He gave Sam a brief haunted smile, then watched the chief close the front door. Only then did he speak.

"Our Sinterklaas festival, it has to go ahead."

"Aw hell, Joep," said the chief. "You were at the meeting tonight. You saw what it's like. The town's tearing itself apart. I'm about ready to deputize people and break out the riot gear. What you're asking, it isn't going to help."

"How will stopping our Sinterklaas festival help?"

"You saw how angry everyone is. If your shindig goes ahead, there'll be all manner of pissed off people coming your way. They're blaming you lot as it is."

"Us lot."

"Joep, you know what I'm saying here. People will see this as a sign that the Dutch community doesn't care what's happening."

A flash of emotion shone in Joep's eyes: anger, wild bubbling ready to erupt rage, and pain, terrible, heartfelt agony. There and gone, a single glint that was quickly suppressed. "My own son is missing," he said quietly. "Have you forgotten already?"

The words kicked Sam in the stomach. Caleb had been his best friend, and he missed him as much as he missed his mum. Sometimes more, because his mum had been gone for so long.

"Aw hell," his dad said. "Sorry Joep, that was insensitive of me." He gave another of his sighs. He was giving a lot of them lately. "But that's what will happen; why are you celebrating when your son is missing? That's what they'll say—and I have to agree that it doesn't look right."

"What would you have me do--sit at home wringing my hands? I've done enough of that. We have done everything we can to find him; there are posters around town, pictures in the newspaper, we've offered a reward on national TV! Tom, you know the efforts we have gone to. I will *never* give up on my son, but please, let us have our festival. It is important in ways you cannot understand."

Sam saw his dad's shoulders slump. "What's all this about Black Peter, anyway? You can't honestly believe a legend took your son?"

Joep frowned. He pursed his lips and glanced at Sam

before saying, "Zwarte Piet is a euphemism for the devil. There is a story in our culture that a long time ago, the good Saint Nicholas triumphed over evil, and every year on Saint Nicholas Eve, the devil was shackled and made his slave."

Chief Wilson stared at him, stony-faced, saying nothing.

"It is like my friend Rinus said: your Santa Claus is about consumption. There is no soul to it. If you take away what is fundamental to power, Saint Nicholas would not be able to keep the devil shackled, and evil would reign free."

Outside, the wind wailed louder. The trees whispered and chattered, their voices skittish.

"In some of our legends," Joep continued, "Saint Nicholas is not a saint at all, but Wodan, the god of the dead. Master of the dead-ferrying ship that takes the deceased to the other world. And Zwarte Piet--Black Peter--he is the dead returned, one of Wodan's crew. He is the one who steals away the wicked children."

Sam's head spun--the devil running loose? The god of the dead? This was all crazy--crazier than anything he could come up with!

A dustbin lid clattered to the ground somewhere outside, and Sam jumped. The Bensons' blue heeler, AJ, barked in return from farther down the road.

"The world is old, Tom. And old things have mysterious ways, ways many cannot accept. Our stories are all jumbled, cultures dragged and mixed together--who knows the truth anymore? I doubt even Black Peter knows who he is--if he is real."

All Sam could see in his mind was a ship—a dead-ferrying ship!—riding wild moonlit waves, rotting sails somehow still catching the wind, with its devil captain at the helm—

The knock startled them all. Sam nearly screamed.

"Tom! Open up, dammit. We need to talk!"

"Oh great," Chief Wilson grumbled. He looked past Joep and pointed at Sam. "Stay there son, okay?"

Sam nodded; he had no intention of getting any closer. He could hear more than he wanted to from here. He watched his dad rub his heavily stubbled face and he nearly cried. This was his own fault! All the trouble his dad was going through--he had caused it all!

It had been Caleb's idea to steal the game; Sam didn't even own a PlayStation. But he had watched enough cop shows to know he was an accomplice, and that meant he was just as much to blame. Didn't matter which way he told it.

He dad swung the front door open and confronted the old grouch. "Jefferson, why the hell are--"

"I know who's in there, Tom. I saw 'em knock, so don't bother playing cute with me."

"Who I've got in here is none of your business."

"It's my damn business when it affects the town!" The old man pushed open the door until he saw Joep Sassan in the hallway.

"Dammit, Jefferson--"

Sam gaped at the old man. He was wearing a bathrobe! His grey hair stuck up all over the place, more even than Sam's usually did. He looked like somebody's crazy granddad fresh from bed!

"I want t'know what he's doin' here," Jefferson said, flapping that wrinkled finger at Joep, "'cos frankly, I don't trust him none, and I'm ready to do something about it even if you ain't."

"Now listen,-"

"No, you listen, Chief," Richards said, his chest swelling like it always did when he was angry. "All this goddamn nonsense about someone playing at Santa and sinking into the ground with our kids! That's crap an' you know it." He pointed that wrinkled finger at Joep again. "These Dutch bastards are behind this, tryin' to ruin our Christmas so they can brainwash us with theirs. We've all seen the way they carry on an' how they all keep to themselves. Hell, they don't even come to our town races! What does that tell you 'bout them?"

The picnic races, held at the showgrounds on Ballentyne Road every December the twentieth and twenty-first, attracted thousands of visitors from across the region. They were the biggest and most important day of the year for Morisset.

"It tells you there's more to us than money!" Joep Sassan was trembling, and Sam wondered if he was about to explode. He'd only seen Caleb's dad this angry once before, and that was last year. Jefferson Richards seemed to have forgotten *he* was the reason the Dutch didn't attend the races. They knew when they weren't welcome.

The wind was growing even stronger, coming on now the night was drawing near, blowing inside to tug the faded made-in-China Christmas tinsel decorating the lounge

doorway. The gale howled in delight at this new game and the narrow confines of the hall echoed its glee.

"Back off, Richards."

Sam watched in awe as his dad planted his hand in the middle of Jefferson's chest and pushed him out of the doorway onto the porch. He caught sight of the Edmunds watching from across the street. They were whispering to one another, and Sam knew that soon the whole cul-de-sac would be there with them, eager for another free show. Jefferson Richards had lived on the same street as them for more than four years and the old man was forever giving the neighbours something to comment on.

"Christ in a wheelbarrow, Tom!" Jefferson knocked the Chief's hand aside. "He knows what's goin' on here, don't you get it?"

"Just listen to yourself! You're being a fool. The Dutch aren't behind this any more than you are!"

"A lot of the town knows better!"

"I'm warning you, Richards, let me do my job."

"If you let that damn festival go ahead--"

"Goddammit! I'm the one with the badge and that means I get to decide what happens, not you! I'm going to count to five, and if you're still here, I'm arresting you for disturbing the peace, interfering with an investigation, harassment, verbal assault--"

Richards glared at him, and Chief Wilson began counting.

"One. Two."

"Fine. Have it your way," Jefferson Richards held up his hands in mock surrender, even if his eyes never gave in.

"Three. Four."

"But this ain't done with!"

"Five."

Richards turned and stormed off. "You all saw that, right?" He hollered at the people across the road as the wind tugged at his hair. "We all know whose side Wilson's on!"

Sam watched his dad glare across the road before stomping back inside and slamming the door behind him. As the echo of that sound died down, Joep said, "Thank you, Tom. I-"

"Listen, Joep, holding your festival at a time like this isn't the best thing to do. I'm sorry, but I can't-"

"It has to take place, don't you get it?"

Something in Joep's expression silenced Chief Wilson.

"Tomorrow is December the fifth. Sint-Nicolaas' eve. It's their night, and it doesn't matter what they really are, or even if you believe. Tomorrow is their final night in this world before they return to wherever they came from. But they will come again next year on November the 15th. They always return, and more children will be taken if we don't stop them now! You have to let us do what must be done."

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Long after his dad had gone off to bed, Sam got up and went to his closet. Carefully, he dug beneath the puzzles and board games for the illicit prize, the game they hadn't even played. He stared at the cover, at the fast cars and criminals, the shining guns, and knew what he had to do.

An image of his missing friend flared in his mind--Caleb laughing so hard that milk started dribbling from his nose, and then he was coughing and spluttering and laughing even harder-

The memory cut him. It hurt so much. Sam scrunched up his eyes in an effort to stop the tears, but in that darkness another memory waited; Caleb was strutting down the hallway, his fingers twitching next to the invisible six-shooters at his sides. Then he stopped, his eyes squinting as he tilted back the invisible cowboy hat and said in his best Clint Eastwood, "I'm callin' you out, punk--"

Sam opened his eyes again. He wiped away the tears running down his cheeks and sniffed. He tried not to think about the deep dark world into which Caleb had been taken, or what might be happening to him there--if he was still alive.

They had stolen the game, and the god of the dead had taken his friend and would now come back for him, and not even his dad could protect him. His dad's powers were diminished already; the town he had protected for years was turning against him and he wouldn't have any strength left to fight Black Peter.

He should've told Caleb not to take the game. He should have done what his dad would've expected of him. Instead, he had giggled nervously. He had *wanted* Caleb to take it. For whatever stupid, dumb reason, he had wanted to steal the game.

"I'm sorry, Caleb," he whispered. The game burned in his hand. "But I'll make it right. I promise."

Outside, the wind was relentless. Torn sails flapped as a ship of the dead sailed ever closer -

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The blustery storm had blown itself out during the night to leave the morning clear and still, the trees all danced out. From the lounge window, Sam watched sunlight flash off the cruiser's rear bumper as his dad drove away, and he raised his hand in return.

"Bye, Dad," he whispered. His stomach fluttered. It had been doing that all morning.

He looked across the road. The Edmunds kept a close watch on him when his dad asked, but he couldn't see anyone there now. They could be doing exactly what he was doing-- peeking out a window. They were always spying.

But there was no time. Let them call his dad if they saw him. He grabbed his BMX. He was breaking a promise doing this but he didn't have a choice.

Old Maitland Street was a curving, sweeping, two-lane blacktop ten minutes' cycle ride from home. This time, he made it there in nine. And parked out front of Caleb's house and along the grass verge on either side of the road were more cars than Sam had ever seen there before.

He quickly scanned them for his dad's Cruiser, but he couldn't see it.

He jumped off his bike at the start of Caleb's and pushed through the old photinia hedge growing along the front. He hid his bike deep within, where he knew it wouldn't be discovered.

Some afternoons, their bellies full of pastries he

couldn't name, they would lie here, Caleb and him, watching the road, taking turns counting cars (red ones were worth five points). It had always been a low-scoring game.

Sam swallowed; his insides hurt again. The game thrust down his pants, stolen for the sake of it, cut into him, its edges sharp and biting.

On the house side of the hedge was a row of melaleuca trees that grew up over the photinias. Their thick trunks and wild branches offered even more hiding spots. Cautiously, Sam made his way towards the front gate, careful to stay hidden amongst their shadows.

He could hear raised voices ahead of him; he knew who it was. Mr Richards, a rifle slung over his shoulder, was pointing a finger like another gun into Rinus van Dyke's face. But the other man wasn't flinching. Rinus van Dyke never flinched. That man was scary, big-time freaky.

"I don't care what you think!" Jefferson Richards was hollering again. "We'd just as prefer to look around ourselves, without your help."

"And you really think you'll find the missing children *here*?"

"Oh, we know they're here! It's exactly the sort of thing you lot would do."

It was sounding a lot like last night all over again.

Sam didn't recognize anyone in the group of men standing behind Jefferson Richards, but he didn't need their names to know who they were. One of them had on a brown long coat, another a cowboy hat. Most of them had jeans and boots, and all of them had rifles. They were the outlaws, come to take

over his dad's town. Come to cause trouble.

A car passed by and screeched to a stop near the gates. A door slammed. It was Chief Wilson. Sam ducked down. His dad looked angry, Incredible Hulk green-in-the-face type angry.

"What the hell's going on?" he heard his dad yell. "Dammit, Jefferson! What did I tell you?"

"I know what you told me, Tom! I ain't a fool."

"He wants to enter," Rinus van Dyke said, not taking his eyes from the outlaw. "But I told him no."

"An' I told him I didn't much care for his no! I'm entering, and that's all there is to it!"

"They can have you for trespassing," Chief Wilson said, standing before them now with his hands on his hips.

Richards glanced back at his men before confronting the chief again. "I don't much care for what you have to say either, Chief. Like I said last night, it's obvious whose side you're on!"

Sam had seen enough. If he was going to act, he had to do so before Jefferson Richards got this whole thing closed down—and that, by the looks of things, wouldn't take long. He backtracked a little and then slid from the bushes and hurried past the far side of the house. He ran around to the back, where a large blue marquee was set up a little away from the house. Beyond it, tall eucalypts framed the four-acre property and hid them from the neighbours.

There were a lot of people gathered. Far more than he'd expected. The Dutch ladies all wore long, colourful skirts, some with brilliantly striped aprons, many with white caps

or high pointed bonnets. The men wore long pants, striped shirts, and black caps. Bright colours everywhere.

The mood though, was dull. Voices hushed. Even the smiles were troubled.

Sam didn't recognize anyone, but the Dutch did tend to keep to themselves; Jefferson Richards was right about that. Other than Caleb and his dad, Sam had only met two others from their community—and one of them had been Rinus van Dyke.

As he scanned the gathering, he spotted a man standing to one side. He was dressed in black, and a sudden ripple of terror shook Sam where he crouched. As he prepared to turn and run, he saw the man's bright white hair and he knew it wasn't Black Peter. Mrs Emmerson hadn't said a word last night about the thing that took Dane Gelder having white hair, and that hair was so bright, she would've.

The man looked like a candle the way he stood there. A black candle.

Before Sam could think on the matter further, he spotted Mr Sassan making his way out from the crowd. His white suspenders shone as he gestured to his friends to stay put. At his neck was a red neckerchief, and a double row of large red buttons fastened the front of his black shirt. The rows swelled outwards in the middle, and for a moment Sam saw the man in the newspaper article again.

But the image didn't last, because as Mr Sassan headed for the front gates and Sam hurried to intercept him, it was obvious no smile had filled his eyes for a long time.

"Mr Sassan, here, take it." Sam pulled the stolen game

from his pants and thrust it out towards him. "It's why Black Peter took Caleb. You can use it to get him back."

Joep Sassan looked totally blank.

"We stole it, and now Black Peter's after us. If you give it to him as an offering, maybe he'll return Caleb."

Mr Sassan reached slowly for the game. He stared at the cover, then back at Sam. "My son stole?"

"We both did, sir. But it was Caleb's idea." It was difficult saying that last bit aloud.

That unsettling blank look persisted, but some kind of shadow was building around the edges. Sam glanced back at the gate. Behind his dad, another patrol car had pulled up and Sam recognised Officer Wilkins climbing out. His dad's second in command was so skinny that it couldn't be anyone else.

"Sam, my friend," Joep said with some difficulty, drawing Sam's attention again. "I am surprised. I did not think you were such a bad influence on my boy. It is obvious I was wrong, no?"

"But--"

"Sam?"

They both turned to see Chief Wilson stalking towards them, his hands wrecking balls at his sides. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Behind him, Mr Richards had turned his gun finger on Officer Wilkins. Wilkins might be as thin as they came, but not even Jefferson Richards' flapping would knock him about. That man always reminded Sam of Rinus van Dyke.

A sudden growl of thunder rumbled across the heavens.

Sam looked up, but the sky was clear.

Slowly, the gathering at the marquee behind him fell silent. Even the confrontation up by the main gates stopped. And in that silence Sam heard another sound, like a continuous echo of that mysterious thunder, a low mumble that didn't waver in tone or volume.

A wave of cold swept over the gathering, a biting wind that swirled no leaves and rippled no fabric. It stole breaths on its way through the showgrounds and was gone before anyone could shiver.

In its wake, Sam looked at his dad standing halfway down the drive, his head cocked to one side.

He was so far away.

They stared at one another, and then Chief Wilson's eyes went wide.

Sam felt it behind him: cold--bone-aching coldness that made him shiver and tremble. He didn't want to turn, didn't want to see what he knew would be there. It wasn't real until he saw it.

A second passed in unbearable silence.

A heartbeat.

Then his dad called, "Sam!" and the spell was broken. Suddenly there were shrieks from those in the marquee, but Sam couldn't find his voice. He had a frantic sense of motion about him, but it was all he could do to turn, because now he needed to see. He had to see what had taken Caleb and Dane and Phillip and had come for him-

It was so much taller than his dad, even thinner than Officer Wilkins. Filling a blurred outline of something that

looked poised to attack was darkness, like the richest night, the deepest well.

Sam knew at once that Caleb was dead. He knew they would never laugh and joke and spill milk and count red cars together ever again. And that flashing thought broke through his terror and made him groan.

He also knew as he looked at the thing before him--the thing that couldn't be there--that sometimes death wasn't the worst thing that could happen.

Dimly, he heard his name being called, but it was such a fragile sound, so weak compared with that rumbling echo swelling around him. He dragged his eyes from the monster to look for his dad, but his eyes caught sight of the white-haired old man again. Only now there were two of them. Three. Even more. They had formed a wide circle around him. They began to sing in an odd rumble, never once pausing for breath, as slowly, they stepped closer until their hands linked.

Black Peter didn't move.

Sounds engulfed Sam, but they were all dulled, impossible to make out, like whispers from another world. Suddenly one rose louder than the rest. It made a loud pop, then echoed. Immediately one of the candle men on the far side of the circle jerked backwards. He cried out, clutching his shoulder as he fell.

Jefferson Richards stood with his rifle raised, smoke sifting from the barrel. Behind him were the outlaws, their guns all coming up, and they were sighting and they were--

"--fire! Don't anyone damn fire!" Chief Wilson was

screaming and running to tackle Jefferson Richards as the old man prepared to shoot again and-

Black Peter moved as soon as the circle was broken, and Sam could only watch it come towards him. He couldn't even scream as it stole him away with its long, sleek-black arms. Its touch was cold, its hands like frozen concrete.

The shadowed monster opened a hole in the day. Darkness spewed out, infecting the light--darkness so vast that Sam at once felt dizzy. Tiny specks of light, distant stars and whole universes, drifted way back in that emptiness.

It pushed him towards that black hole of a sack and Sam tried to scream but when he opened his mouth the darkness stole his voice and it was all he could do to breathe. He thought he heard his dad holler again and even the pop of Mr Richards' rifle once more, but those sounds were from one of those other galaxies.

From some other distance he heard more of that rumbling thunder, that monotone song from the candle men. Their voices were growing louder, and he felt the cold hands gripping him weaken. He struggled to free himself but touching Black Peter was like touching slowly melting ice; he could barely get a grip. Every time he opened his mouth to cry out, that blackness took away more of his life and weakened him further.

The rumbling words grew stronger. Electricity surged about him. It prickled his skin, tickled his hairs.

The circle had reformed, except now it wasn't just made of old men with white hair. Now it was made of all the men and women--children too--all holding hands or linking arms

or slinging their arms across each other's shoulders. Many had their eyes closed. Children clung to their parents and sang along with them, their voices every bit as commanding as the grownups'.

Suddenly the shadow let him go and Sam dropped to the ground. He scampered away from the monster as quickly as he could. His world spun and he wanted his dad, but before he could stand, someone grabbed him and hauled him to his feet. It was Mr Sassan, his arms huge and powerful, his eyes wild. He gripped Sam tight and thrust him back towards Black Peter.

"Take him!" Joep demanded, and the stolen game cut painfully into Sam's shoulder like a reminder of his sin.

Sam finally found his voice. "Dad!" he screamed, bucking and twisting, trying to kick Joep's shins. "Dad!"

His dad called back, but he was on the far side of the circle and there was no way through. Not even with a gun.

Someone else called out, this time Joep's name.

Sam hollered again as Black Peter approached him.

Rinus van Dyke broke from the circle. His face was expressionless, but his eyes were fires, and they flickered brightly. He put a hand on Joep's arm.

"Joep, the boy isn't to blame!" Rinus pleaded. "You know that! Sin calls to sin, there is no mistake."

Joep looked at his friend. He took a sharp sudden breath. His muscles trembled, but still he didn't let go of Sam.

"We both did it, we both took the game," Sam stammered as Black Peter bore down upon them. "But it was Caleb's

idea--it wasn't mine!"

Black Peter was less than five feet away.

Joep opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He stood his ground before the approaching horror, holding Sam in front of him.

"Caleb is gone, and we cannot bring him back," Rinus said urgently. "No matter what you do, it will not bring your boy back! But if you do this terrible thing--"

The hands holding Sam tightened until they hurt.

"Joep! You are better than this!"

"No," Joep croaked, looking from Black Peter to his old friend. "He took my boy, Rinus. He took my Caleb!" Joep threw the stolen game at the archaic demon. The game vanished, swallowed by the blackness.

"Doing this won't change anything," Rinus said. "It will only make things worse, you know that!"

Black Peter stretched out its spindly arms. It flexed its long black fingers. Sam screamed--

And Joep suddenly groaned. He stumbled backwards, dragging Sam with him as Rinus van Dyke quickly wrapped his arms about them both. Sam looked up and saw the conflicting emotions swirling within Joep's eyes as Rinus guided them into the protection of the circle. He saw a grieving father desperately wanting revenge, but saw too the man in that newspaper article, his big caring smile beaming out for all to see.

It's our way of uniting the town, he had said.

Sam held onto him, gripping his arms as fiercely as they had held him.

The song continued. Louder. A melody of voices that slowed Black Peter's advance. It made no sound as the rhythmic chanting began to drive it back again--back, staggering as it went, each step growing leaden.

Even Jefferson Richards' outlaws were singing now, and Sam finally understood some of the words. He gaped at Rinus van Dyke.

"Just sing," the man said.

So he did, as loudly as he could, a rendition of "Silent Night" that could have made the angels weep. Others about him were singing the same, or "Rudolf the Red-nosed Reindeer," or "The Bloody Red Baron." Christmas carols sung out around them, mixing together with traditional Dutch songs, all against that constant thundering rumble of the candle men in whatever language they spoke.

Sam watched as violent sparks sizzled and spat. Bright blue arcs leapt from the air onto the arcane shadow. It turned what passed as its face towards Sam, and he quickly closed his eyes. In years to come, he would wake screaming from a faceless nightmare reaching out for him, but right now, thunder rumbled in the clear sky, and it was the sound of galloping horses. A wind began to howl about them, flapping shirts and dresses and wild amongst hair. Black Peter, or whatever demon it was from ancient history, arched its back in silence.

Something else rose from the earth. A huge swamping shadow that crested well above Black Peter, something that dwarfed the town. Its presence was massive. Sam felt himself groan and he heard others do the same. Some wept, but the

songs went on and that monumental shadow drove down upon Black Peter like a wave upon a reef.

It lasted all of seconds, the briefest flirtation with archaic legends, before the night was empty once again.

The wind stilled. The smell of ozone filled the air. A light rain began falling from the sudden clouds that appeared over the town. The townsfolk fell silent. They let the drizzle touch them and wash away the terror. There was no trace of it now, not even a stain upon the earth.

"Sam! Sammy!" His dad was there, his face flushed. He looked like he had tried to walk through a tornado. "Are you okay? Jesus, are you all right?"

Sam gripped his dad tight and buried himself within his father's scent.

"What the hell were you doing here? I told you to stay home-"

"He came to help me rescue my Caleb," Joep said softly.

Sam looked up and knew he wouldn't be able to hold back the tears this time. "Did we save him?" he managed to ask before he was swept away.

"Yes." There were tears in Joep's eyes too, tears and something else replacing the last of the rage. "Yes, we saved him."

Sam recognised it at once. It was what he had been seeing in the mirror himself ever since he had stolen that game. He glanced at Jefferson Richards, handcuffed and submissive, his face disbelieving, then across to the fallen man who was being hurried away. The world looked so different though tears.

"Next year they will visit a different town," Rinus van Dyke said to him. "Like Saint Nicholas does in our homeland every year. They will visit a town where they have forgotten what Christmas is really about. It is inevitable. The way people are now..."

Sam couldn't look away from Rinus van Dyke's oddly coloured eyes; they were like ash, with flecks of bright green. The man looked away first and Sam blinked. He stared around him, from face to face, from Mr Sassan to Mr Richards, to those men with forgotten rifles, and he saw the same expression carved out of their genes. It was evident all over their faces. As he began sobbing, he realised that those candle men, the white haired men of ritual, were gone. He hoped they would turn up in the next town and save those people from that dead-ferrying ship, too.

Above them all, clouds that looked so much like galloping horses swept silently towards the horizon.