



Christmas in Lapland by Mike Longmeadow

Winter had taken hold. Lapland's tundra was silent, overcome by the wintery darkness that enveloped the arctic circle during the longest nights of the year. Annuka kept her gaze locked on the sky on this cold and cloudy morning. For the last two weeks, the sun spread its light for an hour at the most, barely lighting up the sky before disappearing behind the horizon for the following twenty-three hours. On this morning, the few rays of sunshine that made it through to Annuka were creating reflections of glitter on some low-lying clouds that floated under the grey and dense ceiling. The clouds were lightly flickering, which meant that snow, a lot of it, was coming soon. That was the sign she was waiting for: The time had come to gather the reindeer at the camp and take them to join the festivities located to the north.

Annuka went to get Mikko, her brother. He was busy preparing the fur and tanning the leather for winter in the workshop next to the barn. She walked in, pushing hard on the large wooden door to slip through a small opening she had created for herself. Mikko was bent over a workbench designed to stretch the leather so it could be worked into clothing. She watched from the doorway as he skillfully spread a protective mixture, the last step in the process before their mother, a great color specialist, came to dye them.

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“Mikko, the clouds are glittery!” Annuka said, then immediately left to join the reindeer who were grazing in the field.

Mikko grunted in acknowledgement, but his eyes remained fixated on his leather skin, making sure he hadn’t missed a spot with his special protective liquid—made from the brain of the deceased animal that sacrificed its life to ensure the survival of others during winter. When he was satisfied with his work, he left the workshop to join his sister in the fields.

The wind carried cold and humid air that was filled with snow, biting at Mikko’s skin. He tucked his head in the wool collar of his jacket and ran toward Annuka, already calling on the reindeer in the middle of the field. The cold never seemed to bother her, something he found utterly fascinating, as he watched her making grand gestures to guide the reindeer with her jacket wide open. When he reached her position he started grabbing the reindeer who had already responded by placing a harness on them. The other reindeer started arriving in droves. Their perked-up ears and energetic walk betrayed their excitement to get going, and Mikko didn’t know where to line them up. The sibling’s role was to choose the strongest and most apt ones and bring them to the starting point of the great annual appointment on the morning of December twenty-fourth.

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After they made their choice, Annuka gathered the chosen nine near a heap of bushes that poked out from under the ice. The reindeer let her do her thing, following her without question as she checked them one by one to convince herself this group was the right one. Mikko then tied them together in a circle so they could create a circle of heat around them that would protect both he and Annuka during the trip. While Annuka returned home to get supplies, He fed the animals a special mixture created to make sure they had the energy needed for their task.

Annuka returned shortly after with a large tarpaulin made of cloth and filled with sticks and rope, all of it harnessed to her back to let her walk freely. She rejoined Mikko in the field, and together, they erected a tent to wait for the big day with the reindeer. They were in for a long trip; they had to be ready to leave as soon as they got the first signal.

Once the tent was up, it was Mikko's turn to go home for other necessities, returning with his arms full of furs, cushions, and pillows. He could barely see in front of him, having dug a space with his chin on the cushions hiding his view to be able to guide himself. Annuka's laughter echoed in the cold air as he approached the camp with his long, heavy strides as he tried to avoid tripping, which he knew made him look like a clumsy cartoon character. Once he finally arrived at the tent, the siblings set themselves up as comfortably as they could by placing a few cushions on the frozen ground and slipping under fur skins to warm up.

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The sun went down, and the clouds kept the snow they were holding, waiting for the right moment to let it fall. With the wind rising and piercing through the tent cloth, Mikko and Annuka huddled together to generate some heat while watching the fire dance to the impulse of the breeze. The night would be cold; they both knew it.

Excitement filled Mikko's mind, so before letting sleep take over and carry him to dreamland, he went outside to check on the reindeer to make sure they wouldn't be tempted to return to the field. As he walked around, checking the harnesses, he revelled in the heat bubble they had created, it felt like the inside of a warm barn. A snowflake fell to earth and landed on his nose. He looked out to the field and saw the sky filling up with snowflakes falling. He called his sister. "Annuka, it's starting. Come out!"

Mikko returned his attention to the reindeer, but this time to untie them from the circle of warmth they had created and line them up. He was busy dealing with a more belligerent reindeer when Annuka joined him.

"You have to stroke his snout. It will calm him." Mikko did as suggested, and it was a success.

Annuka had prepared their travel bag, filling it with food and furs. She strapped it on top of the largest reindeer, making her bag look like an overdressed person sitting on its back, then went to caress its snout, whispering in its ear: "Your effort is greatly appreciated."

When they were ready to leave, both looked to the sky as it became illuminated from far away. A spotlight shot up, signaling all reindeer ranchers and their pilots to the rally point. Annuka moved to the front of the line of reindeer while Mikko brought up the rear. They strapped on their snowshoes and went on their way, both in awe at the spectacle offered to them. The spotlight shone across the land, making the snowflakes scintillate and sparkle, giving them the impression crystals were falling from the sky. The glittery snowflakes created a tunnel of light that would guide them to the launch area.

With her snowshoes tracing a path under her, Annuka started singing as she walked. To an uneducated ear, the sounds were filled with melancholy, but if one listened carefully, they would notice music filled

with pure joy, softness, and life. The chant's echoes reached Mikko, who immediately joined in with his sister. Both walked along the light tunnel with their nine reindeer tied to one another in a single file.

After two days of walking in a thickening blanket of snow, Annuka and Mikko finally reached their destination. Many others were already on site, busy tying up their reindeer to giant sleighs. Annuka was disappointed she could not choose her sleigh and went to the last available one.

"Next year, we leave a day in advance," she said.

Mikko nodded in agreement but added, "I don't mind, but it will be hard to navigate without a landmark to guide us."

"We'll see once it's time," Annuka said while she inspected the sleigh.

The temperature inside the glow of the gigantic spotlight was quite comfortable, prompting Annuka and Mikko to remove their furs so they could work with more freedom of movement. While Mikko tied the reindeer to the sleigh's harness, Annuka went to the building from which the spotlight was radiating. After a few seconds inside, she walked back out carrying a large red bag that was so full it seemed ready to explode, and it was all held together by a thin thread of white silk string at its top. If this were any other time of the year, the weight of the bag would've crushed Annuka. But on this magical day, certain laws of physics became flexible. She placed the bag at the back of the sleigh and joined her brother, who was finishing up with the last reindeer after stroking its snout.

"They seem to be in good shape this year," Mikko said as he continued to stroke the head reindeer's snout. He fixed his gaze on Annuka, his face as serious as ever. "Who's turn is it this year?"

"It's my turn, and you know it. Don't even try!" Annuka jumped into the sleigh before her brother could.

Mikko laughed. "Don't worry. I'm playing with you. Just be careful on takeoff. Do you have your list?"

"Yes, Nicolas gave it to me when I picked up the bag." Annuka patted the front of her pants, indicating the location of the special list.

"And where are you going?" Mikko asked, more curious than interested.

Annuka's chin lifted ever so slightly as she replied, "Canada, I asked for it."

Mikko wrapped his arms around his torso, mimicking trembling from the cold. "I'll never understand your love of cold places, dear sister. Happy sails! I hope you get plenty of milk and cookies!" Mikko was backing up as he spoke, Annuka having already given the reindeer the "go" signal by shaking the reins.

The sleigh jerked ahead under the impulse of the reindeer, and after a few steps, they were running, lifting the sleigh from the ground. Annuka circled the camp a few times, then started to rotate as she headed for the giant spotlight. As she circled the camp, Annuka noticed she was at the front of the nine sleighs that led the annual drive. She disappeared in the ray of light, and the others followed suit, one by one, each passing through the light which created a sucking sound that made it seem like a vacuum pulled them in. Silence fell on the whole region after the sleighs passed through the light. Mikko went back to the large house to join the other guides and ranchers to wait for his sister's return the next morning. A feast awaited them all, prepared by Mrs. Klaus, Nicolas' wife, for the celebrations that would last throughout the night.

Annuka, now on the other side of the light, found herself instantly sent to the Canadian sky. The reindeer were running along an invisible ground, waiting for her instructions. She opened a trap door on the sleigh's floor and turned on the mechanism inside it. Within a few seconds, a geographical map of Canada appeared in front of her, pickled with thousands of little white dots, which were her destinations. She pressed a button with the word *begin* on it, and the reindeer immediately started to descend in a spiral, searching for the many little white dots on the map. Annuka grabbed the safety bar on her sleigh to hold on, aware the spiral they followed on their way down could be a rough ride, but confident the reindeer knew the way and would land safely on every roof without being seen.

A few hours passed, and all who had asked for a present had received theirs. The huge red bag was empty and laid at her feet in a heap. Exhausted and her belly full of milk and cookies, Annuka was free to return to the ray of light and go back to Lapland. She passed through the light, and soon the reindeer landed softly next to the toy workshop.

Mikko was waiting for them as they arrived, and the reindeer nodded in unison in salute. They were nearly done with their annual mission. With a return nod to the reindeer, Mikko went to help Annuka untie them and put the Christmas sleigh away for another year.

The cleanup took some time, both Annuka and Mikko had full bellies and felt sluggish. While he slowly gathered what they would need for their return, filling their travel bag with food leftover from the previous night's celebration, Annuka went to each reindeer to give them a thank you scratch on the snout. It took them even longer to go around and say their goodbyes and wish everyone a happy new year. Once they finally joined the road home Mikko was already excited for next year, for it would be his turn. His dreams would be populated with tropical islands and warm places.

On the road home, despite being exhausted from the adventure, the siblings carried a light heart and sang hymns of joy. Even the reindeer joined in, somehow finding the strength to prance along to the songs, energized by the idea they could return to their field to graze.

When they arrived at their camp, the sun had just disappeared behind the horizon for the next two weeks. The only light was the snow reflecting the moon's light. The long night had begun. Mikko untied the reindeer while Annuka began to dismantle their tent, left standing after they left in a hurry. Mikko freed the reindeer from their reins and harnesses, who responded by running out to the field, strutting proudly as they rejoined the pack. Mikko smiled at the pride they demonstrated, and also noticed the other reindeer in the pack all lowered their heads to the returning nine, in deference to their exploits.

After finishing to gather everything from the tent, Mikko and Annuka made the short journey home. Their parents had prepared a great celebration; the sibling's favorite foods covered the table. As the fireplace burned brightly, the whole family joined the siblings. All were ready to celebrate until dawn, even if that only happened in two weeks.

This is a story pulled from a document discovered in a shed in the Lapland Forest, which explained how gifts are made and distributed during Christmas. The story you have just read explains the distribution portion, divided into nine sleighs that can transcend the laws of physics to ensure proper gift distribution. In the document, it is also explained how the Nicolas Klaus factory produces and wraps up all the presents. But that's a story for another time. The kids have to go to bed now.

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