

Millicent returned to the comfort of her sweats after her humiliating morning with Margaret, but even their warmth couldn't hide the cold truth--

*I'm getting fat again*, Millicent thought as she inspected herself in her bathroom. Her waist was wider. Her belly and butt were bigger. And her perky breasts were baggier.



Sadly, that was only the second most disturbing revelation of the day--the first being that the 'sweet dreams' she'd been having were as real as the fat she fondled between her fingers. Not the dancing gingerbread, of course; that had to be some sort of hallucination, but she was obviously sleep-walking, sleep-talking, and, most of all, sleep-eating. But where was the evidence of her gluttony? (Besides what she saw in the mirror, of course.) Where were all the cartons, crumbs, and wrappers? And who was responsible for the men's voices her sister had heard?

Millicent was still on edge when she visited the grocery store later that morning. Unfortunately, she waited too close to lunchtime and the hunger-numbing effects of the Monte Cristo sandwich had worn off. *Healthy foods*, she thought as she serpented the aisles.

Of course, supermarkets are arranged so that, no matter what you come in for, you must parade past something frivolous and fattening to get it. On her way to the deli for some chicken to make a salad. Millicent found herself in sweet central, surrounded by cookies and processed pastries.

*Yummy for the tummy!* came a voice in her head. Her stomach rumbled in agreement.

Millicent hurried down the empty aisle filled with empty calories. It seemed to go on forever and a wonky wheel kept steering her into the neon-wrapped confections.



*You know you want some*, came the voice again.

"No. I. Do. Not!" Millicent said aloud.

"Why not?"

"Jesus!" The voice wasn't in her head, but on her shoulder. It was Crunch, the leader of the Gingerbread brigade.



"Be careful with that word," he said. "Especially this time of year."

"Go away! You're making me fat."

"Now is not the time.  
To worry what you weigh.  
Christmas is com—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know the song. I can sing it in my sleep."

“But you are asleep, silly!”

“What?”

“Would I be here if you weren't?”

“You mean...this is all a dream?”

“Uh, Ssssure.” Crunch slid into his S like he was skating across Snowflake Lake.

“The conversation I had with my sister this morning?”

“Dream.”

“The voices my mother heard?”

“Dream.”

“What about this?” Millie lifted her shirt and pressed a finger into the flab around her waist.

"Tee-hee!" Crunch laughed and rubbed his own belly. "Dream!"

"In that case," Millicent grabbed a box of Toll House and, no longer fearing the toll they'd take on her figure, threw them in the cart. "Let's eat!"

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For the next several weeks, Millicent lived life to her fullest--literally. She drifted about in a holiday hangover, gorging with impunity even when the gingerbread boys weren't around: ice cream at the park, candy at the sweet shop, and dozens upon dozens of cookies baked with her mother. Whenever things got a bit too



real, be it the painful tightness of Millie's belly and clothes, a snarky look or comment, or even her reflection in the mirror, the trio of Pole dancers appeared with a snack and a song to reinforce the dream illusion. And although they never crossed the line into magic, heavy doses of incense and peppermints kept her focus fuzzy.



Of course, had Millie cashed one of the many reality checks she received, there was nothing they could do. Fortunately for them, she wanted to believe, which was why she was the perfect match for Santa. That made Chip feel even guiltier, exploiting Millie's innocence and all, and he ultimately refused to

appear during the day (“When she should be leading a normal teenaged life,” he said). Still, he dutifully danced and sang during her “dream” stuffings... until the night Millicent mentioned how glad she was she wasn't getting fat in real life.



That's when the ginger finally snapped.

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“Don’t eat!”

Millicent was in the McDonald’s drive-thru when a tiny voice pierced the din of idling engines. “What?” she replied, looking around.

“I repeat, don’t eat!”



Millicent peered over her belly and breasts to find Chip standing in her lap frantically waving his arms.

“Hi Chip! I haven’t seen you lately. Care for a few fries?”

“No, I’m tired of all the lies!”

“What do you mean?”

“Millicent, you’ve gained fifty pounds! And it’s our fault you’ve gotten round!”

“You can’t get fat from a dream, silly.”

“Every calorie is real!” Then he gave the flesh of her waist a vicious squeeze. “You’re eating far too many meals!”

“OUCH!” Millicent rubbed her tender tummy.



**HONK!** A cowboy in a pick-up truck behind Millicent waited impatiently for her to pull to the window. “Move it, tubby!”

The redneck’s rude words, coupled with the pain from her pinched paunch, made Millicent realize the truth may lie in her lap after all. Her face sagged and her eyes welled with tears. “You mean... This isn’t a dream?”

“Sorry for our little scheme.” Chip shrugged his shoulders. “How ‘bout we eat a salad instead?”

“No, thanks,” Millicent said, grabbing Chip by the neck. “I’m hungry for some gingerbread!”

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“This is all my fault.” Crunch sat on the edge of Millicent’s bed with his head in his hands. “Honesty is the best policy, Chip always said.”

“And look where it got him.” Crumb cast a weary glance to Millicent, who paced the room in a bra and pink sweatpants. “Almost dead.”

“I never would have eaten him had I not thought it was a dream!”

Crumb rolled his eyes. “At least you stopped when you heard him scream.”

Millicent bit her lip. “How is he?”

“He’s battered,” Crunch sighed. “And he’ll probably need a candy cane to walk, but he’s alive.”

Fortunately for Chip, Millicent had fallen back on a childhood habit of nibbling the toes and feet of character cookies first. She did it on everything from animal crackers to chocolate Easter bunnies. Santa found it endearing. The gingerbread men thought it was sick. Still, their friend was alive. Had he gone in head-first he would’ve bought a one-way ticket to Tummy Town.

“He should’ve stuck to the plan,” Crumb lamented. “Thanks to you he can’t even stand!”

“Oh, so this is my fault now? You’re the ones turning me into a cow!” Millicent threw her hands in the air. “Jesus, why am I rhyming?”



“No, Millie,” Crunch said. “You’re not to blame.”

Crumb jumped up and down on the dresser. “She’s the reason Chip is lame!”

“**I**M the reason,” Crunch corrected. “This was all was my horrible idea. Lies, fake dreams, parading about in public...it’s a wonder this didn’t happen sooner.”

Millicent sat on the bed next to Crunch. “Will I ever see Chip again?”

The dip in the mattress caused Crunch to bunch against Millie’s well-padded posterior. “I’m afraid not. Don’t worry, the North Pole nurses will take good care of him.”

“I’d like to tell him I’m sorry.”

“We’ll tell him tonight when we get home.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Yes,” Crunch said, climbing from the divot. “It’s time we faced the Christmas tune.”

Crumb whispered, “What about the elephant in the room?”

“Oh. Yes. Don’t worry, Millie,” Crunch said, clearing his throat. “When we explain to Santa what we did, I’m sure he’ll turn you back to your skinny-minnie self.”

“And us into elves on a shelf,” Crumb muttered.

Millicent winced. “That bad?”

“It won’t be pretty,” Crunch said. “We violated about twenty laws.”

“But...why?”

Crumb jumped to the bed and onto Millie’s lap. “We wanted you to be the new Mrs. Claus.”

“What happened to the old Mrs. Claus?”

The gingerbread boys looked heavenward.

“Oh my.” Millie sat in somber silence for a moment. “Why me?”

“Because you’re sweet, pretty, and Christmas spirit fills your head,” Crunch said.

Crumb patted Millicent’s leg. “Despite your taste for gingerbread.”

Millicent ran her hand over her belly. “I just wasn’t fat enough.”

“Stupid, right?” Crunch said, shaking his head. “Santa may like some jiggle in his package, but he would never ask you to get fat for him. That’s why I’m sure he’ll change you back when he finds out it wasn’t of your own volition.”

“You’ll lose the weight without nutrition!” Crumb added.

“What if I don’t want to?”

“What?!?” The cookies said in unison.

“The last few months have been a dream--and not because you tricked me into believing it was one. I’ve spent quality time with my mom, rediscovered my baking ability, and enjoyed foods I haven’t tasted since I was twelve. And now I know it was for a good cause.”

“A good Claus!” Crumb corrected.

“Sorry,” Crunch said. “Santa would never allow it.”

Millicent arched her eyebrows. “He doesn’t have to know.”

“Are you kidding?” Crunch scoffed. “You know Chip. That cookie will crumble the minute Santa looks at him. His henchelves will be here within the week.”

“Then we’d better get busy.” Millicent pinched some decorative icing off the chocolate cake on her dresser and popped it in her mouth. “I could use a few more pounds of protection before we head up to the arctic.”

“Y-y-you want to come back with us?”

“How else am I going to catch Santa’s eye?”

Crumb shrugged. “Shall I go and bake some pie?”

Crunch’s glazed expression changed to an icing stare. “Yes!” He exclaimed. “This mission’s do or die!”

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Reinvigorated, the trio doubled their efforts in Chip’s name. Crunch and Crumb kept a low profile, hiding in Millicent’s room until her mother went to bed, at which point they would emerge to offer Millie encouragement, rub her belly, sing carols, or whatever else was necessary to keep her spirits high and mouth wide. Without all the trickery they could focus on what really mattered—



Making Millicent fatter.

It worked. Maybe a bit too well. Millicent gobbled everything in sight and by Thanksgiving was more stuffed than the turkey she demolished.

“She won’t be able to fit in Santa’s sled,” Crunch whispered while spying on her from a nearby couch.

More than her size, Crunch worried Millicent was losing her looks. Her doughy face and double chin made her look twenty years older and her tummy and breasts sagged lower than the ornaments on the elven Christmas tree. Santa wasn’t superficial, but with Christmas on the line Millicent’s fading sex appeal was a concern. Her belching at the table wouldn’t endear her to him either.

Crumb peered from a pillow. “Where is he anyway? Are we left for dead?”

That was the even bigger problem. Christmas was only a month away. They expected the reindeer team to return for them after their emergency pick-up of Chip, but they never did. Since then, they hadn’t heard a thing. Had they been exiled? Were they destined to spend their remaining days stuck in the home of a vengeful fatty with a sweet tooth?



“BURRRP!” Millicent leaned back from the table and gave Crunch a discreet wave.

“All I know, he better hurry.” Crunch didn’t like Millicent’s hungry eyes, so he crouched behind a cushion. “I’m really starting to get worried!”

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By December, the novelty of their mission had completely worn off. They felt like condemned prisoners. When Crunch overheard Crumb recommending ginger to Millicent for an upset stomach, he wasn’t sure if he was stupid or suicidal.

In truth, after months of slaving and ducking discovery (or worse) at every corner, a quick snap of the neck didn't sound half bad.

Still, they kept up the mission, and their spirits, as best they could. Until the day they finally got the message they had given up on receiving:

“Santa's coming!”

The trio were killing time in Millicent's room. Millicent lounged in bed reading a magazine, while Crunch mindlessly rubbed her belly and Crumb played solitaire on her laptop computer.

“Santa's coming!” Crumb repeated after stunned silence was the initial response.

“How do you know?” Crunch challenged.

Crumb pointed at the computer's screen. “We got an e-mail from Chip!”

*He must have snuck onto the Christmas Computer*, Crunch thought. He wasn't sure how he did it in his condition, but he was proud of the kid.

“I thought you said Santa would send his elves?” Millicent asked.

“I guess since we're at your house he decided to come himself.”

“When?”

Crumb squinted at the screen. “Tonight.”

“Oh my God.” Millicent rolled off the bed and rushed to her closet. “Nothing fits me anymore. I can't let Santa see me in sweatpants.”



Millicent rummaged through her wardrobe, flinging a checkered top and matching skirt onto her bed, covering Crunch. As Crunch wiggled free from the trendy garment, he suspected it covered him a whole lot better than it would cover her.

He was right. After donning a pair of leggings and a black camisole that fit more like a tank-top, Millicent somehow shimmied the skirt up to her

waist, where it stretched across her hips like an overburdened rubber band. (Crunch and Crumb stepped back a bit, lest it snap.) Unfortunately, she didn't get the Christmas miracle necessary for the buttons of her top to close.

"It's no use," Millicent huffed. "I'm sorry, guys. I can't let Santa see me like this."

"But Santa needs you!" Crunch pleaded. "Nay, the whole world needs you!"

"Did you just say, neigh?" Crumb queried.

Crunch nodded. "I've spent lots of time with reindeer lately."

"What if he doesn't like me?"

"Millicent, relax," Crunch said. "Santa loves you."



Crumb bounded off the bed and into the closet, where he retrieved a stretchy pair of white leggings and an oversized sweater. "Trust us, this will do!"

Crunch wasn't so sure. The sweater was downright ugly, and he'd just read in one of Millie's magazines that wearing white after Labor Day was a fashion faux pax. Still, he nodded enthusiastically. At least it looked like it might fit.

"Really?" Millicent said, taking Crumb's hastily plucked ensemble. "I suppose if he likes me in this, he'll like me in anything."

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"You may want to cool it on the chips."

Millicent had set-out an impressive display of candlelit munchies in the kitchen but was mangling it with her nervous noshing. If she kept it up, there'd be nothing left for Santa.

"Where is he?" Millicent wore a path in the rug with her pacing, and with every pass scooped more chips from the bowl.

“Did it occur to you that he might be just as nervous as you are?”

Crunch and Crumb watched Millie pace from their perch on the back of the living room sofa. In truth, they were even edgier than she was. Their future, not to mention the future of Christmas itself, rested on Santa falling for the frumpy chunkamonk plodding the floor before them.

They felt doomed.



Then, from the lawn arose a great clatter, and Millie wobbled to the window to see what was the matter.

“He’s here!” She shouted, spraying chips everywhere. The men scrambled over but saw no one there.

They looked to the chimney, but nobody came. Instead, there was knock at the door.

Kind of lame.

“Santa?” inquired Millicent, expecting an elf with a sack, but when she opened the door, there was a most interesting man staring back.

“Hi Millie,” he said with an air debonair; he had a closely-cropped beard and slicked-back grey hair.

“You’ve lost weight,” Millie said, not sure what to say.

“So have you,” the man said in a voice merry and gay.

Of course, she had not, but she didn’t correct him.

As a child she was higher on the obesity spectrum.

“Won’t you come in?” She asked coyly. “I made us some goodies.”

“I’m actually here for some runaway cookies.”

“We’ll find them later,” as away they did scurry. “But please grab a bite to take back in your surrey.”

“It’s really a sled,” Santa said as he entered. “A surrey has wheels, which are hell in the winter.”

The jolly man’s face reddened at his small-talk and swear, and though it was awkward Millicent didn’t care.

“Try the pâté, I made it myself. That’s it, open wide, be a good little elf.”

After he’d gobbled the treat he’d been given, he was offered another and thought, *this is livin’*.

So he grabbed a chip and responded in kind, forgetting the cookies that had been on his mind.

“Mmmm!” Millie exclaimed, accepting his offer, while he got to ogle the REAL treats in her coffer.

Her belly, so round! Her breasts, so saggy!

Despite being hidden by clothes that were baggy.

Her eyes they were bright, her cheeks they were jowly.

(Though the weight in her face made it seem rather scowly.)

Still, it was the best the Elf’d felt since December,

And the fresh Christmas cheer certainly showed in his member.

Despite losing weight from the previous fall,

His pants suddenly felt two sizes too small.

“Someone’s glad to see me,” Millicent giggled,

As the flab on her stomach wiggled and jiggled.

St. Nicholas touched it to get it to stop,

But the softness of it made him want to pop.

So, he whisked Millicent upstairs as she squealed in delight,

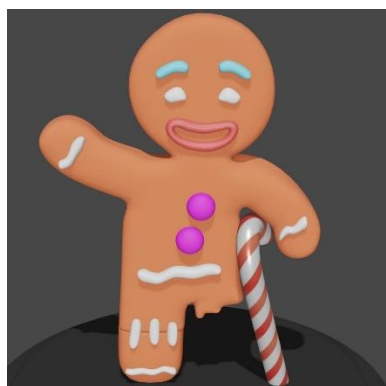
“Happy Christmas to me!” and they humped through the night.



THE END

--EPILOGUE--

Santa and Millicent eloped in Las Vegas before flying back to the North Pole the following day. St. Nick's svelte physique and young bride took the workshop elves by surprise, but they were too busy keeping up with his newfound virility and enthusiasm to dwell on it. For her part, Millicent fit right in. Though her millennial updates to Mrs. Claus' traditional recipes and wardrobe curled the toes of a few elves, her sweet and unselfish disposition converted most.



Chip lost some speed after losing his leg, but he never lost his boyish enthusiasm. After being reunited with Crunch and Crumb upon their return, all three were pardoned for their crimes and promoted to I.T. (Who better to understand chips, bytes, and cookies than gingerbread men?) With Millicent's help, they convinced Santa to upgrade the Christmas Computer and even utilized a new GPS app to shave significant time off his route. To this day, their efforts are acknowledged with three "Christmas Cheers" (one for each cookie) just before Santa takes flight.

The ending wasn't quite so happy for Millicent's mother and sister. Though they understood and appreciated what she did and why she did it, the North Pole's gain was their loss. Each Christmas Eve, Millicent's mother baked a plate of cookies and set them out, while Santa dutifully picked them up and delivered a fresh batch from Millicent. It wasn't the same as baking together, of course, but it was the closest thing to a Christmas tradition they could share.



Margaret drowned the sorrow of her sister's departure in eggnog and treats baked by their mother. She was a poor surrogate for Millicent as a baker—she always seemed to forget a crucial ingredient—but was her equal as an eater. She gained twenty pounds over Christmas break and by the following year weighed more than Millicent, despite being several inches shorter.

But that, as they say, is a tale for another time.