

A Very Scary Christmas

Mick was about 50ks from Crentham when he heard an ear-ripping din like a sound mix of a roaring T-Rex and a blaring air raid siren. He swung the HiLux into low, desert scrub and stomped on the brakes. What had made the hellish noise? Desert and sky weren't telling.

Suddenly a camel crashed sideways against the grill with a yowl of pain, jolting vehicle and driver. It limped into the desert. A big, bloody chunk had been torn out of its left flank, and its left hind leg hung from a single strand of cartilage. Seconds later the leg lay in red dust. The rest of the beast continued on for about 30 meters before it collapsed. It made no attempt to get up.

“Shit.”

Mick grabbed his Winchester.

* * *

Trembling, the camel released a succession of short, labored growls. A thunderous rifle shot ended its suffering.

“What the hell did this to you?” Mick said, examining a huge fly-infested bite that had been taken out of it.

He heard something in the distance. A scream maybe. It was hard to say. He wasn't even sure that a human had made it. The wind had picked up. Maybe it had carried the sound from the nearby ranges, where he'd spent most of the day deporting invasive species—

donkeys, camels, wild boars—with his rifle. Any one of those beasts could have been responsible.

* * *

Mick bounced behind the wheel of the HiLux. Just as he was about to start the engine, he paused to take one last look at the partly chewed camel. Dust whirled around it.

Nightfall was about an hour hence. He didn't want to be out here in the dark. Not even with his rifle and more ammo than there were feral pests.

He tore off like he was driving a rally car.

* * *

Crentham had a pub that served cold beer and hot meals and could put him up for the night. So said Google. Perth was over 500ks away. As much as he'd love to see the missus and kids on Christmas day, the second he walked through his front door, he'd have to do a 1-80 and drive all the way back. Bugger that!

Christmas with strangers in a town straddling nowhere. The beer had better be cold and the chicken parma hot.

* * *

The sun poked above the desert's edge, an orange hump bathing the landscape in dimming shades of reddish

gray. The temperature had hit 44 earlier. It would plunge to zero once the sky had sucked all of the heat out of the air.

Crentham was no tourist ad. The town comprised just a handful of old buildings blighted with rot and disrepair. Its one saving grace was a Federation-style pub. Despite a badly corroded roof and awnings that had brewer's droop, it looked like the Hilton to Mick right now.

So where was everyone?

Trundling down the main drag, the *only* drag, he couldn't see a single soul or motor vehicle. The joint looked deserted. Had the townsfolk gone on holidays?

Up ahead, in the middle of the street, stood an object of some sort. A number of objects. All lined up. As he drove closer, he could make out beer kegs. Dozens of them. What on earth were they doing there?

He parked the HiLux in front of a poky, derelict shop, the front window of which had been painted over from the inside in dull aqua, and climbed out. He stared at the kegs awhile. There was something bizarre, sinister even, about their positioning in the road, like they'd been left out for alcoholic extraterrestrials who got real nasty after they'd had a few.

He approached the first keg. Full or empty? Only one way to find out. *Full*. So was the second keg and the third. Why weren't they and all the others in the pub, where they belonged?

He heard sobbing.

A small boy, encased in shadow, stood outside the pub entrance. He stepped into the dying light. Tears glistened on his chubby face. “Hey, mister,” he sobbed, “have you seen Santa?”

“Oh.” Mick said. “G’day there, young fella.” He looked for the kid’s parents. “Where’s mum and dad, inside?”

The boy shuffled toward him a couple of steps and, in between gasping sobs, said, “Have you seen, Santa?”

Mick crouched in front of the kid. “No, I haven’t, bud.” He checked with pantomimish care that no one was in earshot. “But can you keep a secret?”

Sniffing back snot, the boy hung his head and nodded dully.

“Santa will be dropping by as soon as you’re in bed fast asleep. How about that? That’s a bit of good news, eh?”

Mick smiled, expecting the boy to buck up. But the boy didn’t. Instead, he squealed in horror and bolted for the entrance.

The boy’s plump, bleach-haired mother poked her head outside the door, furious with him. “What are you doing outside?” she whispered. Get in here. *Now!*” She set eyes on Mick. “Who are you?”

“I’m—”

Scouring the heavens with fervent paranoia, she waved him inside. “Come on. You can’t stay out here.”

He glanced skyward as he made his way into the pub. What was she looking for?

* * *

Lights off, blinds down, the pub was in darkness. At first blush it looked empty. Then patrons began to emerge warily from hiding. A deadpan, beer-bellied truckie in gray Stubbies and a navy-blue singlet rose from behind the bar. Further along the bar, an old couple helped each other up. Hubby hopped on one foot as if he'd stepped on a nail. "Ooh me leg," he rasped softly.

"That darn gout," his wife whispered.

A young Aboriginal guy wearing a mustard beanie and a toothless middle-aged woman in a bubblegum miniskirt peeked out from under a billiard table. The woman gave Mick a lewd gummy grin. "Ow ya goin, luv?"

"Have you seen Santa?" the truckie asked Mick in a hushed voice, not a trace of jocularly (or anything else) on his face.

Mick smiled just to be polite. Was the truckie having a lend of him?

The pub's owner, a minnow of a woman who needed a bigger face for all her wrinkles, came out of an adjoining room, accompanied by a ginger mullet with a heavily tattooed bloke attached to it. She eyeballed Mick like a gruff judge. "And you are?"

"I'm Mick," he said at normal volume.

She motioned with her hands, *keep it down, keep it down*. "What are you doing here?"

"I work for the state government. I shoot feral pests. Look, what's going on? Why are we whispering—in the

dark? And what's with all those beer kegs out on the road?"

"You do know what time of the year it is?"

"Of course. Christmas time."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

Head trembling irritably, the owner leaned toward him for emphasis. "Santa's coming." She ducked under a table. "Now, everybody, hide!"

Mick stayed put for a second. Why was everyone so stressed over a pending visit from one of the locals in a probably moth-eaten Santa getup? He shrugged—when in Crentham—then hunched his six-foot-four frame under a table. The boy, his mother, and the ginger mullet, his father presumably, were huddled under the next one.

A loud thud came from outside. Then many loud thuds. It sounded like it was hailing blue stones.

The boy whimpered in terror.

"Whatever you do," the owner whispered, "stay down. I bloody well mean it."

Mick happened to glance at the toothless woman. She air-tongued him. Jolted by a tremendous crash as something with dreadful mass slammed down on the pub's roof, he bashed his head on the underside of the table top.

Right.

That did it.

He'd had enough of this BS.

He unfolded himself, marched to a window, and flung the blind up.

“Have you taken leave of your senses?!” the owner said. “Shut that blind right now!”

The carcasses of native and introduced species, half-eaten, strewed the road outside, soaking the dirt in gloom-colored blood and innards. “Fucking hell,” Mick murmured.

Something bounced off the dirt. A kangaroo’s head. What could have been the hind end of a water buffalo obliterated a rusted petrol bowser over the road. A deer’s leg slapped down near the window. It swung upward 45 degrees, spun two full revolutions, then fell down and stayed down.

Oh no!

Oh shit!

It wasn’t a deer’s leg. It was an arm. A *human* arm.

Another weighty object assaulted the roof with an ear-boxing crash. Headless, legless, and one-armed, a man’s corpse, if a penis was anything to go by, tumbled off the roof and landed outside the entrance. *Vummp*.

Mick turned from the window, aghast. “There’s a . . . there’s a dead man out there.”

“Yeah, tell us about it,” the owner said, rushing to draw the blind.

The extinction-level cacophony Mick had heard barely an hour ago returned to finish liquefying his brain. It shook all creation. Whatever was making it was right above the pub. He doubled over, pressed his palms

against his ears.

The Aborigine tried to ward off the noisy evil spirit with a droning tribal tune. He quit a few seconds later.

Mick lurched across to the ginger mullet. “Oi! Is there another way out of here?”

“What?!”

“Is . . . there . . . another . . . way . . . out . . . of . . . here?!”

“What?!”

Swaying this way and that, Mick staggered off as if trying to walk in a straight line on the deck of a storm-tossed sloop. He would have to find his own way out.

* * *

A hallway led Mick to the pub’s kitchen. A door lay at the opposite end of the kitchen and, beyond it, a rundown beer garden.

The floor quaked as if an immensely heavy object had set down in the main street. Then silence struck.

As Mick reached for the doorknob, someone—*ouch!*—pinched him on the bum. It was the toothless woman. She ogled him like Jeffrey Epstein checking out a girl scout. “Where ya off to, gorgeous?”

“To get my rifle.”

“Take me with you.”

“You’ll be safer here.”

“Please. I haven’t had it in weeks.”

She lunged at him with gaping lips. He pushed her

away. “What do you think you’re doing? I’m a married man.”

She lunged again. “So am I.”

He shoved *her* off and stumbled outside.

* * *

Glancing over his shoulder to make sure the other married man wasn’t tailing him, Mick slipped into a narrow lane.

Heavy metal chains rattled and clanked in the road, just out of his line of sight. He crept in that direction.

“GRRROGGGGG!”

The voice boomed like an angry pagan god’s.

An empty beer keg, top chomped off, detonated the ground in front of Mick like a stainless steel cannonball, and a stinging shock wave of dirt dropped him on his ass. Kicking his legs like pistons, he shuffled backward, away from the point of impact.

The Earth trembled. A Jurassic something or other was tromping about, huffing and grunting with bowel-loosening bass. Its massive shadow paved the road.

Mick heaved himself to his feet. He skulked to the lane entrance and peered around the corner of the pub. Tears flushed dust from his eyes. He wiped them away to make sure he really was seeing what he was seeing. He really was.

Outside the pub, brought to sick and twisted life, was the cover of a death metal Christmas album. Eight huge

crocodiles at least six meters tall, standing upright, were chained in pairs to a colossal sleigh. Each wore a Santa's helper cap and a red leather vest upon which was an illustration of Santa committing a horrific act. No two acts were the same. Cannibalism, decapitation, and emasculation were among those depicted. The sleigh was built like an immense open-topped Panzer tank. Giant iron spears thrust in and out of its sides with harrowing velocity. Globes of bloody flesh flew off the tips. Squatting on the front of the sleigh was an enormous horn fashioned after a shrieking demonoid skull. Scariest of all was Santa himself. Forty feet high and nearly as wide, he was dressed in the usual costume and sported a typically big, bushy white beard that was atypically red owing to all the blood it had soaked up. His teeth were long, white stakes, horrifically pointed, and his fingers bore black claws that made shoulder-tensing screeches when they scraped against the beer kegs, which he downed like whiskey shots. He turfed a pair of kegs, grabbed another pair, and bit the tops off.

“GRRROGGGG!”

Panting in terror, Mick backed up against the side of the pub. Sweat rained off him, making audible splats on his boots.

The HiLux was enticingly close. He could get to it and his rifle in seconds if he sprinted. He inhaled an “I can do it” breath.

Racing this time!

The crocs caught sight of Mick dashing toward the

HiLux and pulled frenziedly against their chains, jaws snapping. *Let us at him!*

Santa noted the running man with an irritated grunt.

Mick dived inside the HiLux. He snatched the rifle, scooped up some boxes of ammo, then froze. He had a question. How many rounds was it going to take to bring Santa down? He had the answer. Probably a million.

The windscreen exploded as a beer keg sailed through it. An unsafe piece of safety glass opened up his forehead, and a crimson curtain spilled out.

Half-blinded by blood pouring into his eyes, he blundered back outside. Standing was problematical. He gazed up, way up, at Santa who glared down, way down, at him with eyes that glowed like Black Saturday. Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. And he's a fucking man-eating monster!

Mick felt dead weight in his hand. Winchester weight. In all his wooziness, he'd forgotten he was holding the rifle. He toddled toward Satan—*Santa*—like a drunken Wyatt Earp facing down an uppity gunslinger in Dodge City. The rifle was heavier, a lot heavier, than usual, but he managed to heave it to shoulder height. That was his shoulder, wasn't it? Yes, it was. Now, where to shoot Santa? The gut? No, too much fat. Right between the eyes? No, too much bone. The balls? Yes! That was sure to bring the monstrous bastard to his knees.

Suddenly the toothless *woman* barged in front of him, blocking the shot. "If I get you some Band-Aids, can I have a kiss? With tongues?"

He had a good mind to shoot *her*.

“Will you piss off? Can’t you see I’m trying to kill Santa?”

“Don’t worry about Santa, darl. I’ll sort bloody Santa out.”

She strutted toward Santa as fast as *her* bandy legs and high heels would carry *her*. “A word in your ear, sunshine!”

Santa contemplated *her* for a second, then, with a surly grunt, yanked a chrome lever on the side of the sleigh, releasing the first two crocs. They charged at *her* like a pair of racing goannas. *She* stopped and gave them the finger. Undeterred, the first croc plucked *her* up, its forelegs surprisingly dexterous, and bit *her* in twain. Blood sprayed from each half like water out of a fire sprinkler. The second croc snapped hold of *her* feet and thrashed its head from side to side until *her* legs and the rest of *her* bottom section were in its gnashing jaws.

Mick pumped round after round into the reptilian malefactors, stinging but, alas, not killing them.

Clutching his mammoth belly, Santa boomed out a mocking ho-ho-ho. A pub window shattered.

“You think this is funny?” Mick yelled. “You think this is funny? Well, laugh at this, dickhead!” He fired the remaining rounds at Santa’s head. They pinged off it. One punched a hole in a faded sheet-metal sign on the pub. He ran out of bullets but kept squeezing the trigger, anyway. Real bullets were finite, imaginary bullets were limitless, limitless but, as it turned out, totally

ineffective. With a primal scream of “Up yours!” he chucked the Winchester at Santa. It scopped a croc.

Stumbling toward the HiLux, Mick couldn't help but wonder why it was shrouded in red mist and parked miles away. Why didn't he park it closer?

The ground shuddered beneath pile-driving footfalls. Santa was coming for him.

Mick smacked the ground, picked himself up. He'd just got to the HiLux when Santa whacked it aside. It spun across the street like a carnival ride and demolished an antediluvian shop. There went his no claims bonus.

A chubby hand as big as a queen-size bed reached down out of the sky and enclosed him like a sushi wrap. Lifted high, higher than the pub roof, he gazed down to see Santa's broad, round face. It was large enough to land a helicopter on. Santa looked pissed. Not drunk pissed, pissed pissed. “YOU'VE BEEN VERY NAUGHTY!” he boomed at too many decibels to count. His cavernous mouth yawned open—a sewer would have smelled sweeter—and his dazzling white pointed teeth clashed, impatient for more grub. Lowered upside down into the nightmarish hole, Mick heard insane cackling. His. Caustic fumes rose from Santa's gut. They ate away Mick's eyes and seared his flesh. Then a host of foot-long stakes were driven right through him.

© Copyright 2023 Aussie Horror - All Rights Reserved

<https://aussiehorror.com/>