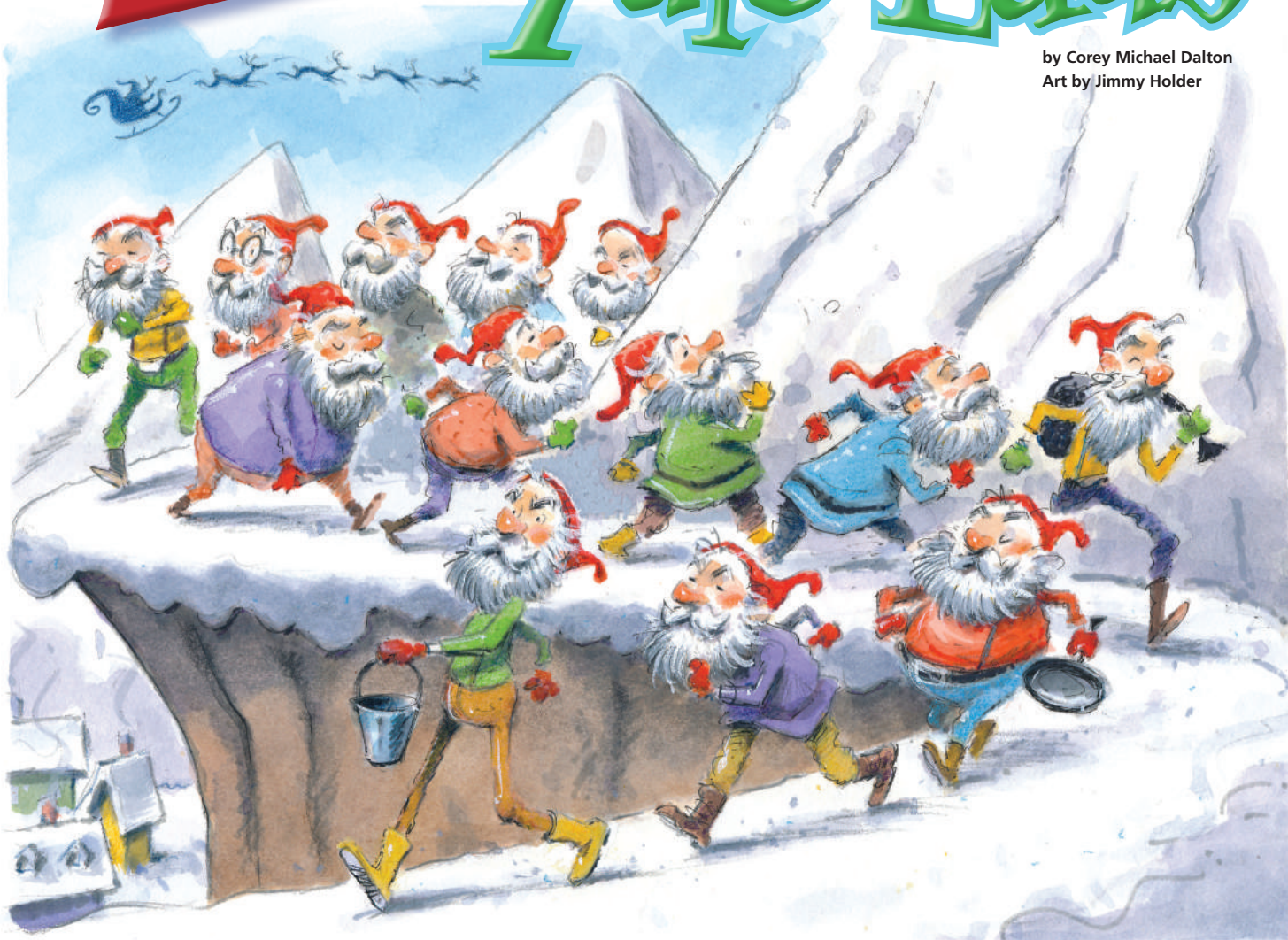


Meet the Yule Lads

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Kids everywhere know the story of Santa Claus, the jolly fat man who flies all around the world in a reindeer-drawn sleigh delivering presents every December 24. But what if Santa wasn't such a nice guy? What if he played pranks on bad kids and even stole from the houses he visited? And what if he wasn't just one man visiting for one night, but a pack of 13 unruly brothers who camped out in your home causing trouble for weeks? Well, that's just what kids in Iceland have to deal with every winter when the Yule Lads pay their annual visit!

Who are the Yule Lads? Imagine Santa's

shorter, grubbier, trouble-making cousins and you won't be far off. The Yule Lads first appeared in Icelandic folklore in the 1600s as the sons of Gryla, a fearsome troll lady with a reputation for snatching naughty children. Originally, the 13 men were used to scare children into behaving; folks said that the Yule Lads would throw disobedient kids in a sack and deliver them to their troll parents! Personally, I'd rather have pizza delivered.

But over the last hundred years, the Yule Lads have mellowed, cutting ties with their vicious mother and father. They have remained mischievous pranksters, though—

and they still occasionally hang out with the Yule Cat, an oversized kitty that chases children who haven't received new clothes for Christmas. Better ask for socks this year!

According to tradition, the first Yule Lad makes

the long trek from the mountains to the farmsteads below on the morning of December 12, followed by one brother per day for the 13 days leading to Christmas. Each brother stays for two weeks and arrives according to a strict schedule.

The Yule Lad Lineup



1. Sheep Worrier

The first Yule Lad to turn up is always Sheep Worrier, who loves to milk unattended sheep. Fortunately for the sheep, his stiff peg legs prevent him from doing much milking!



2. Gully Gawk

Next is Gully Gawk, a fellow who likes to hide in ditches and wait for just the right opportunity to sneak into the cowshed and snatch the cows' milk.



3. Stubby

Stubby, the shortest Yule Lad, is the third in line. He steals cooking pans so he can eat the burned bits stuck to the bottom—his favorite part.



4. Spoon Licker

Spoon Licker appears on December 15. As his name suggests, this extremely thin Yule Lad collects all the dirty spoons in the house so he can "clean" them with his tongue.



5. Pot Scraper

The fifth brother is Pot Scraper, who swipes leftovers from cooking pots.



6. Bowl Licker

As brother number six, Bowl Licker hides under beds and waits for kids to put down their bowls, which (unsurprisingly) he then steals.



7. Door Slammer

Next comes Door Slammer. He likes to squeak hinges and slam doors while people are trying to sleep. What a jerk!



9. Sausage Swiper

As the ninth brother to appear, Sausage Swiper takes great pleasure in climbing into the rafters to snatch sausages while they're being smoked.



11. Door Sniffer

Brother number 11 is named Door Sniffer, and has a gigantic nose and a sensitive sense of smell that he uses to sniff out fried bread from miles away. Take that, bloodhounds!

13. Candle Beggar

Finally, Candle Beggar wraps things up on December 24 by following children around and begging for their candles. After he gets the candles, however, he can't decide whether to light them or eat them! (Candles used to be made from edible animal fat.)



8. Curd Gobbler

Curd Gobbler arrives eighth. He's a greedy Yule Lad (is there any other kind?) who gorges himself on a yogurt-y Icelandic cheese called *skyr* until he's about to burst.



10. Window Peeper

Window Peeper is an oddball who enjoys peeking through windows in search of nice things to steal. And if he does a little spying, so much the better!



12. Meat Hook

Second to last comes Meat Hook. His favorite trick is to put a long pole with a hook on the end down the chimney and pluck roasting meat directly from the fire.

Much to the delight of their human hosts, the Yule Lads start departing for their mountain home again—one at a time in the order in which they arrived—on Christmas Day, with the last brother heading back to the mountains on Twelfth Night (January 6).

Despite their love for mischief—and food—the Yule Lads are not all bad. For one thing, they give presents. Icelandic children who

place a shoe on their windowsill each night will awaken to find a small gift (if they've been good) or an old potato (if they've been not so good) inside. That means that good Icelandic children can get up to 13 presents from the Yule Lads before Christmas even arrives! Perhaps the gifts make all the pranks worth suffering through. Unless all the presents are rotten potatoes, that is. ☹

