

GRANNY SAMURAI AND THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

by Samuel Johnson (via John Chambers)

*'Twas the night before Christmas
When all round the house,
Nothing was stirring,
Not even a mouse.*

In fact I was the one who was stirring, i.e. a cake, and I certainly hoped there were no mice watching me while I worked. Mice are very hard to get rid of if you have them, and they smell also. My neighbour Granny Samurai has mice. You can hear them in the walls of her house - which, as it is next door to us, is too close for comfort in my opinion. But when I told her my opinion she snorted and said that mice are highly useful and can be trained to do things. What sort of things? I asked. Eating crumbs, she said. Ha ha, I replied, you don't have to be trained to do things that come naturally. So you were never potty-trained? she asked, cackling, and I said, That's a trick question and therefore unfair. Oh boo hoo hoo, she answered, clacking her teeth between the boos and the hoos and grinning at me widely.

Now it was the night before Christmas and snowing and I was in my kitchen making cake whilst Christmas earworms wriggled in my brain, forcing me to hum along. Earworms are extra hard to get rid of at Christmas, as everywhere you go they are being played to force people to be jolly and merry. I believe however that this can sometimes have the opposite effect. My friend Philip says that when he has an earworm he always tries to turn it into something else. He is so good at this that he hardly knows the real words to songs any more.

Oh Jingle Bells, Santa yells,

*Rudolf's run away.
He stole the sled and off he sped,
Laughing all the way.*

I went on stirring. The cake mix was a heavy sticky goo of raisins, sultanas, flour, milk, eggs and sugar - and was most delicious raw. In fact I had made an extra portion to eat with a spoon whilst the rest was cooking. After it was cooked I intended covering it with marzipan and then thick white icing that looked like real snow but was ten times more delicious. I believe that icing, unlike cake, tastes better hard than liquid. I finished stirring and poured the mix into a tin before putting it in the oven. Then I sat down to watch a Christmas film called *Santa Saves Christmas*. My uncle had rung earlier to say that he was stuck in traffic on the M15 but would be home AQAP. I promised I wouldn't start the festivities without him.

The film was terrible. Even the title was stupid. *Santa Saves Christmas?* Well, what else would he do? This is like calling something *Plumber Fixes Sink*, or *Binman Collects Rubbish*. I switched the film off and took out a book instead. Books are generally better than films, though sometimes it is nice to watch films to give your brain a rest. I started reading.

*'Twas the night before Christmas
When all round the house,
Nothing was stirring,
Not even a mouse.*

And that was when I heard the noise upstairs.

Noises

I am not a fan of noises where they aren't supposed to be. If you are sitting in a car and you hear a funny noise it usually

means something is broken. This is worse in a plane. If you are sitting in a house and supposed to be alone and hear a funny noise, then maybe you are alone no longer - and the next question is, who is there with you? This can be quite unnerving (unless you are a very fierce person, which I am not particularly). But I am not a coward, either. I got up quietly from the sofa, went to the bottom of the stairs and listened. The noise came again. Something was stirring in my house all right, and whatever it was, it sounded a lot bigger than a mouse.

Upstairs Downstairs

I crept upstairs. What I should have done was exit through the front door and call somebody, like my uncle or the police or my friend Philip (though maybe not Philip as he generally makes everything worse, though interesting). I even thought about calling Granny Samurai, but she is (worse)² compared to Philip, and anyway - I thought also - maybe I should try to find out what the noise was before calling anybody at all. Maybe it wasn't actually anything to be worried about! Therefore I gilded my lions and crept silently up the stairs on tiptoe, avoiding creakings by standing on the edges of the steps and never in the middle (a tip I learned in *Spycraft Vol 2*).

The Noise Revealed

The upstairs landing was dark. I raised my head above the parapet and peered through the banister slats at floor level. The noise was coming from one of the rooms. I raised my head some more. If anything attacked me now I was ready to drop onto the banisters and slide away in reverse top speed. This is something I learned from Granny Samurai. *To attack plan big long high etc*, writes Granny Samurai in her unfinished masterpiece, "The Lost Secret Art of Kenjo" (by her). But first plan what, exactly? Er, the attack, I said, when she was

dictating the book to me whilst uttering these wisdoms. The retreat, she contradicted calmly, just in case. This was amazingly good advice coming from her, but perhaps she was having a quiet day. I thought of it now as I left the safety of the banisters and climbed quietly onto the landing and listened. The sound wasn't coming from my room or my uncle's room, or his study either. It was coming from the guest bedroom.

Did we have a guest my uncle had forgotten to tell me about? Somebody nice, who was coming to stay for Christmas and had brought lots of pleasant presents with him? I tiptoed towards the door and bent over to look through the keyhole. Two inches away, an eyeball stared right back. BOO! screamed a voice on the other side of the door, and paralysed my gizzards with shock. The door flew open.

Frights

Some people adore giving other people frights and find it highly amusing, e.g. Granny Samurai. Some monkeys do this also, as do dogs. At the end of our street is a garden with a big hairy dog called Slobbo, who lies in wait behind the hedge for anybody passing. Then he leaps up into the air barking loudly as their hats fly off and their hearts stop and their bicycles wobble whilst they turn and shout angrily at him disappearing, laughing, behind the hedge, his tongue hanging out with drops falling from it. Ha ha ha. Slobbo: 1. Everybody else: nil. (Except for Granny Samurai, who hid herself in the hedge one morning before Slobbo was up, and when he came out for his day's fun, leaped up and shouted WOOF! in his face, then sank back laughing herself, ha ha ha, her tongue hanging out - though no drops - while Slobbo ran for cover. Granny Samurai: 1. Slobbo: nil.) Now it was Granny Samurai: 1, Samuel Johnson: nil, for it was her belonging to the eyeball behind

the door. Quick quick! she uttered, and pulled me swiftly inside. Then she slammed the door behind us.

The Guest Bedroom

The guest bedroom is quite big and looks out over the back garden. There are shelves for storing extra books and things, and also a chimney, which still works. It is the only chimney in the house that still works, although we never use it - not even for guests - as we have central heating instead, which is much easier. In olden days boys of my age and younger were forced to climb up chimneys and clean them from the inside. I bet they would have been excessively relieved to have had central heating instead. I thought of this now, as it was the chimney that Granny Samurai was busy at. I could see this from the giant mess around the fireplace. What are you doing? I asked, but instead of answering she merely tapped her nose with a finger. You mean it's a secret? I said. No secret, she replied. Just itchy nose. Granny make trap for Santa.

Santa

I can't think of anything to scribe about Santa that people don't already know. Except that he doesn't exist, of course. But most people know this, at least most people over the age of six do. And if you aren't over six you shouldn't be reading this anyway, as it is in the 8+ age group (although I actually believe 9+ is better). Granny Samurai is definitely old enough to know better. That's what I thought anyway.

- What do you mean, make trap for Santa?
- I mean. Make. Trap. For. Santa.

She spoke very slowly, as if speaking to somebody whose English was slightly shaky. I looked at the fireplace. The grate was shoved to one side and a large white bucket was standing in its place. On the side of the bucket was printed:

Insto-Tack Super Contact High Adhesive (i.e. glue). The bucket itself was chained to the grate. I frowned. Why is there a bucket of glue in the fireplace? Because I am. Making. A trap. For Santa.

Granny Samurai went back to work whilst I examined the surroundings again. I noticed that the grate had been nailed to the nice pine floor - with very large nails.

- Did you do that?
- No.
- Uncle Vesuvio isn't going to like it.
- Then don't tell him.
- Why did you do it, anyway?
- Because I. AM. MAKING. A. TRAP. FOR. SANTA.

The last bit she said quite loudly, perforating the sentence by beating one last nail into the floor with her fist. If most people are a nice cup of tea, Granny Samurai is a double espresso. Now she was getting annoyed.

- Sam. Stay and help? Okay. Stay and yack yack, no way. Make up mind. Now.

She picked up what looked like an enormous bear trap and bent it open. Then she placed it in front of the bucket.

- In case glue not stick. Ha gotcha now! Old fatso!
- [Pause.] Are you seriously telling me you are making a trap for Santa?

Ignoring me, Granny placed a lasso of rope around a plate and a glass on the ground. The rope was attached to a large steel bracket bolted to the wall. As I watched she took a hipflask from an inner pocket and poured something amber into the

glass. Santa's favourite, she said. From Blackbeard's own cellar. *Sláinte!* She swiggled out of the flask herself. You really are! I said in astonishment. What? she said. Making. A trap. For Santa, I replied.

Madness

I once read in a book about small madness and big madness. Small madness is when you are only dangerous to yourself. Big madness is when you are dangerous to other people also. I am not sure how scientific this is, but it came into my head now. Possibly this was because I didn't know which one Granny was suffering from. This is how our conversation went.

- How can you make a trap for Santa? [Me.]
- Glue. Rope. Beartrap. Nets. Bait.
- I mean... [Pause.] What nets?
- In chimney chim chiminey chim chim cherroo. [Granny singing loudly.]
- [Me interrupting.] I meant, how can you catch somebody who doesn't exist?

Granny stopped singing and looked at me piteously.

- Santa doesn't exist?
- Yes.
- Santa red nose ho ho laughing all the way pressies kids chimney reindeer Rudolf elves north pole. Doesn't exist?
- That's right.
- Says who?
- Er ... says me.
- So where Sam think presents from? Under tree.
- Er... My uncle Vesuvio.
- Ha ha. Poor Sam. Big brain no imagination. Uncle Vesuvio leave presents huck huck huck huck.

She made a noise like popcorn popping and patted me hard on the head. Before I could think of a proper reply a sudden whiff of baking crept into the room and tickled my nostrils. My cake was ready. I turned and ran downstairs to switch off the oven. The great Santa discussion would have to be posthumed.

Downstairs

Granny was waiting for me in the kitchen. I don't know how she does it, but even her shortcuts have shortcuts. The cake smelled good and she had already cut a big slice out of the middle. Can't you wait until I ice it? I said, annoyed. No, she said. Need for bait. And she disappeared back upstairs. My mobile beeped. It was my uncle to say that the traffic jam on the M15 was setting and he would be even later than late but I could stay up if I liked. I liked. And anyway, Granny was there to keep me company. I liked that, too. Mostly. I iced the cake whilst Granny banged and thumped about upstairs, and when she was finished, she came back down and we played cards until midnight.

Cards

I like playing cards. My uncle is a good poker player because he has a good poker face, i.e. You don't know what he is thinking. This is from his diplomatic training. Granny Samurai also is a good poker player, though I suspect she cheats. But this is good life training, she says. And anyway, we don't play for money. Not yet, says Granny.

We sat and played. After a while our philosophical conversation about Santa Claus resumed.

- Why do you believe in Santa?
- Because he is.
- But how do you know that? I mean, have you ever met him?

- Yes.
- You've met Santa Claus?
- Yes.
- Where?
- Kingston.
- Where?!
- Kingston. Jamaica.
- What was he doing there?
- Holiday.
- You met Santa Claus on holiday in Kingston, Jamaica?
- Knock knock. Who's there? Deaf. Deaf who? Ask new question Sam.

And with excessive rudeness she laid her cards on the table. Three kings. Now I frowned whilst she grinned. The conversation continued.

- Maybe it was somebody pretending to be him.
- Big red nose. Red togs. Sled. Reindeer. Gnomes. Ho ho ho. Him.
- Reindeer?
- Yes.
- In Jamaica?
- Sam hallo Jamaica not North Pole. Caribbean. Sand. Sun. Sea. No ice. Wakey wakey.
- And gnomes, in Kingston?
- Ya mon.

I snorted and laid my cards on the table. Three queens and a pair of twos! A full house. My poker face is not as good as Uncle Vesuvio's, and I don't cheat, but I have a top memory for cards due to my scribal training and now I put it to full house advantage. Granny frowned and it was my turn to grin. A full house beats three of a kind any day. We continued our most interesting discussion.

- So why are you trying to trap him?
- Santa owe Granny big. Pay up fatty.
- What does he owe you?
- Presents.
- Presents? What sort of presents?
- Presents presents. Big presents. Five years of presents.
- Have you been good?

Granny Samurai eyed me suspiciously whilst I dealt new cards. I continued along that dotted line of thinking.

- I mean, if you haven't been good, he won't leave you anything. Right?
- Thought Sam not believe Santa long time.
- I just mean, for the sake of argument.

Granny snorted and examined her cards again. Then she examined mine. I had the uncomfortable feeling she could somehow see right through them. Or some of them, anyway. I placed them out of sight under the table but her eyes followed like ball bearings. Then she looked at me again. Good part only applies to children.

From upstairs there came a little bump, and the whole house shivered slightly. It was as if a giant hand had just patted the roof gently, or landed on it.

Granny's eyes flicked up towards the ceiling and she frowned. What was that? I spake. I wasn't normally up this late on Christmas Eve and I suddenly realized how quiet everything had become. Granny shrugged and smirked, which put me on red alert. A few light taps upon the pane made me turn to the window and I saw it had begun to snow again. I hoped my uncle had his snow tyres on or he would be spending the next few

hours slipping and sliding all over the motorway. He probably already was. The bump from upstairs happened again, though louder this time. I nearly dropped my cards. The bump was followed by a tinkle of tiny bells, lots of bells, and then a more thumping, followed by banging, shouting and cursing. Mice? suggested Granny Samurai and laid her cards on the table. I turned mine over. She had a straight flush, which beat my two sevens and assorted others any day. She reached out to rake in her winnings. I looked up at the ceiling. The noises were definitely coming from the direction of the spare bedroom, but I didn't feel like investigating it AQAP this time.

I sat at the kitchen table wondering what to do. The clock struck midnight and kept striking. From the garden outside I could hear angry-sounding hooves. I could see a red glow approaching the kitchen door at full speed. Granny Samurai produced her flask of rum and raised it to her lips. Happy Christmas, Sam, she said, and grinned.