

# The Swedish Dala Horse for Christmas

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“My, my, my,” said the bored little Swedish elf, a tomte named Gus. “The tomte over there is all tangled up in Christmas lights. I volunteered, but he doesn’t want any help. He really should, you know, ask for help. I learned that a long time ago. But I guess he’ll figure it out in his own time.”

It was early December in Tomteberget, the mythical town on the nearest invisible mountain to the North Pole. Gus knew that doing an act of kindness was part of the tomte tradition, and he was inspired this year to do something that would really make a difference.

Comfortable with his own mumbling, Gus went on, “Britta is busy with a new class of bakers, so I can’t go to Britta’s Bageri.”

“They are selling Julmust over at that stand. They say it’s kind of like Dr. Pepper in the human world. People love that drink this time of year.”

“Need any help? No? Ok, Merry Christmastime.” Gus waved and continued down the street bordering Candy Cane Court.

“Oh, wait. Newspaper person. I have great stories I could write!” Gus called to a tomte hurrying past with the TT logo on the front of her sock hat.

“We’re full-up with new stories until the new year,” the harried employee in a raspberry coat called back over her shoulder. She quickly disappeared into the imposing building that housed the ‘Tomte Times.’

“Everybody’s busy...but me.”

As Gus approached the end of the block, a middle-aged tomte with powerful shoulders under a blue and white plaid shirt rolled up to the elbows nearly knocking him over. Thick planks of wood were stacked heavy on his shoulders.

He shifted the pile for better balance after picking them up from the freight wagon as he entered the back of the warehouse. Sweat dripped off his nose, and his arms glistened with moisture from the exertion.

“Now just where do I think he is going?” Gus said as he mumbled out loud. “I’ll just follow along. Maybe he could use some help, although I have no idea what I could do. I may think I’m brilliant at a lot of things, but strength... is not one of them.”

He dodged the back end of the long planks as he tried to walk next to the tomte, but the taller magical being was on a mission and didn’t even notice Gus.

“Oh, Ander, you’re just in time. Put the wood under the window on that side,” said a pleasant voice directing traffic.

“Wherever you’d like,” Ander answered, guiding the rough material to its place. The one in a light pink coat greeted him with a cup of coffee in a colorfully decorated mug as he nodded

his thanks. Then she carried her mug of hot chocolate into the adjoining room and to her chair at the end of a long table full of chattering tomtar.

Gus was peeking through the low window with his mouth open in awe of a world he had never taken the time to notice. In the back of the sprawling warehouse, built of rough timbers and thick beams holding up a peaked roof, were tomtar standing at over-sized table saws. The 'buzzzt, buzzzt,' sound filled the space so words could hardly be heard. There were tomtar waiting to collect the newly sized planks, placing them on their shoulders and fading into the back recesses of the shop. They reappeared after a loud bang, having dropped their load on the pile of planks of the same size.

Some younger tomtar were poised on either side of a large basket, waiting for it to be filled with the odd, leftover pieces of wood that dropped from the clean cut of the saws. Together, they walked to the front cavernous room with stuttered steps due to the uneven weight. They set the new supply down near the several smaller scroll saws. Tomtar were busy following templates of candleholders, sleighs, bells, hearts, simple birds, and horses of all sizes.

The tomtar at the scroll saws moved the flat piece of wood this way and that, allowing the thin vertical blade to move up and down, its teeth eating through the wood piece following the pencil line drawn for that particular shape. The stacks for each shape grew before Gus' very eyes.

Another tomtar collected a pile of shapes now and then, moving them onto one end of a long table, ready to be handled in the next creative section. These small folks took their turn and used sandpaper, sealer, base paint, and paint pots in a myriad of colors laid out down the center within easy reach of the artists.

Meanwhile, the odd scraps from the scroll saws were gathered in a basket of their own and set down in the middle of tomtar of all ages, whittling away. In their hands, detailed sculptures appeared and were set on a shelf to be painted in time for the Christmas rush.

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Gus had a little practice now, walking into places he didn't know anything about and offering to help. So, he walked around to the front door rather than spying from the side of the building. And a small bell sounded announcing his entrance. He stood in a small shop stacked high with amazing things made of wood, all sizes and shapes. From hearts as tall as his 3-foot self to small ones that would fit in his hand. A pair of Bluebirds with the tip of their beaks touching surrounded by a heart of branches and red buds. Swedish flags for plaques on the wall, round-bellied tomte figurines in many different colored coats doing different jobs at the North Pole, to name a few, and exquisitely painted Dala horses.

An older tomte, with a thick, tan apron over her bright blue blouse and flowered skirt, was patting the sawdust off her hands as she pushed through the swing doors, much taller than herself, to join Gus.

"Hello, young tomte. What brings you to our part of Tomteberget on this beautiful winter morning?" Susette said, dusting past her name embroidered on the apron pocket.

"I, um, if I could, that is, if you could use some unqualified help, would like to volunteer. What you do looks fascinating, and I would love to learn."

"And why would you want to learn how to make fake animals and shapes when real animals are what your job in life is," she said with an encouraging smile.

*I wonder if everyone I meet knows more about this tomte-game than I do,* Gus thought before he answered.

“Well, there are times when the animals are asleep and times when I am just thinking, when I could use my hands to create something beautiful?”

“That’s as good of an answer as I have heard yet,” Susette said with a smile. “And we can always use the help. Throughout the year, we all create these items whenever we can. Then, when we get to this side of winter, and Christmas is on the horizon, we gather to make one last blast of things and enjoy all the fun of companionship while we’re at it.”

“I must warn you, dear lady, that I have never done anything like this. I might make a ruin of things, as I have...done in the past. But I would really like to try,” Gus said looking up with only his eyes, with the rest of his body ready to make a run for it.

“Look around. What catches your eye? I’ll start you at a table working on this type, and we’ll see how it goes.”

Gus was like a kid in a candy store. All of these beautifully painted Swedish items, from decorations to folkloric creatures.

“I get to choose? The Dala horse, if I may. I am Gus, by the way,” Gus said, looking up and actually smiling.

“Of course, you are,” Susette said, “and now you’re a carver. Follow me.”

They went through the tall swing doors, and the sound of the busy machines amplified. The chatter from the tomtar at the long table was loud enough to reach over the noise to each other.

Large picture windows on the next wall separated the saws from the finer work of the painters. And Susette handed Gus an apron made of thick, stiff material as they passed through. The light seemed to filter gold through the sawdust suspended in the air.

“I won’t start you on the saws as it is an art unto its own. The precision needed and the attention it demands is of a lesson much later than day one. But you said you’d like to help, right? How about I start you with a nearly completed Dala horse? You can follow with it all the way to completion and keep it as a trophy if you’d like. Or you can add it to the precious items that magically appear in stockings or under a tree this Christmas. Your choice.”

She was walking him to a corner of the warehouse where some older tomtar were sitting on the tops of half-barrels around a pot-bellied stove with a basket of scrap wood in between each of the six tomte. A smaller basket sat behind with roughly carved figurines, ready for the next step.

“This is Gus, a new volunteer. Would you show him the ropes?” watching the grins passing around the six, she added, “Nicely?”

“Sure,” said one. When he looked up, a light showed in the eyes of the tomte dressed in green.

“Gus?” the seated tomte stopped his hands.

“Petre?” Gus said in surprise.

“You nix it, I fix it,” they both said in unison, Petre’s jingle for his tinker’s profession, and then the two laughed.

“Grab up a seat,” Petre said, handing him a rough horse about twice the size of his hand and a 60-grit piece of sandpaper. The paper was strong and smooth on one side, while what looked like a layer of sand was glued on the other.

“Ok. So, fold the sandpaper and fold it again to make it small enough to glide over the horse’s body. Once you’ve removed all the chisel ridges, you’ll move to finer and finer sandpaper until it’s smooth enough to paint.”

Gus had the tip of his tongue caught in the corner of his lip, concentrating while Petre introduced Gus to the others, and all started to tell stories in a companionable way.

Gus was so set on getting this step right that he sanded it with the roughest paper and sanded it some more.

“Whoa there,” Petre said as he noticed Gus in his own little bubble of thought.

“Leave some for the horse’s back and saddle,” he said light-heartedly. “Move to the next finer grit paper already, and be careful around your horse’s nose and ears, or he will look like something other than a horse. Imagine a horse you know and keep that shape you’ve felt over and over again in your mind as you sand.”

“Got it,” Gus said, turning a little red but pushing past the embarrassment and enjoying the memory of the horses he’d met.

Gus blew the sawdust off his figure as he had seen the others do, but a bit of spittle came with it, and he looked around, hoping no one would notice. He quickly blew a dry puff of air over the horse’s back and found the saddle part of the horse was smooth to the touch. Encouraged, he carefully moved to the legs and then the neck of the horse, saving the head for last.

Then he stopped, afraid of ruining it for good.

Gus sheepishly looked at the others from under his sock hat, wondering how he could ever create a horse's head. Every self-doubt he had hidden under the cavalier attitude he showed to others screamed in his ears.

*"You dummy! Why did you ever think you could do something like this. What makes you think you are artistic in any way? You'd better stop before you ruin someone's Christmas when all they get is your deformed horse in their stocking. Quit now and save face while you can. Quit now..."* The voice faded as Gus was frozen, and his face paled as he fought the imaginary battle in his head.

Petre was happily kidding around with the others when he glanced at Gus, then noticed the stopped hands and the fidgeting tomte, ready to run.

Before Petre could reach him, Gus quickly put the partially finished horse back in the basket and turned his back to the others, hoping to slip out before they noticed he was gone.

Moving so quickly, Gus tripped over the basket, dumping its contents of rough carvings across the floor. When he stood up, he bumped the shelf holding the more finished figurines, and they tumbled off the other end and onto the floor as well.

He hid around the corner of the big swing doors, and just as he was pushing through them, Petre was behind him with a comforting hand on his shoulder.

But Gus and the argument about his worthless artistic talent had the better of him. He shrugged off his friend's hand and mumbled, 'I'm sorry. I can't do this. I was an idiot to think I could. Sorry.'" And with that, Gus was out the door and gone.

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The afternoon was waning, and the disheartened little tomte sat alone in the high branches of a tree with his legs dangling and his shoulders drooping as something like tears rolled from the corner of his eyes down his cheeks to the red brick street below.

He finally found his way down the road to Julen Smorgasbord, his favorite buffet rich with his favorite foods, especially at Christmas. Willing to drown himself in his own pity party, he ordered a mug of Julmust, letting his tears drop into the caramel-colored soda.

“I’m just the same as you,” he said to the sweet rootbeer-tasting drink, “Trying to bring joy at this time of the year. But I blew it.”

Petre drew up a chair at Gus’ table with his own mug, enjoying the slightly spicy drink.

“It’s not so bad,” Petre said, looking for a way to interrupt his friend’s gloomy thoughts.

He raised his mug and clinked it against Gus’s. “Cheers!” and Gus’s automatic reaction was to raise his as well.

Petre continued, “The basket is righted, and only one figure lost his legs, but with a bit of creative fix-it, I put him back better than new, and I’m hoping you’d finish him up for me. I believe in what you do. You’re always willing to take on more than you know! You’re welcome to come back whenever you’re ready. You, by the way, are the only one who gets to make that call, not some voice in your head trying to protect you from doing something you haven’t done before. Kind of like riding a bike, as the humans say. First time up, they wobble and fall. But they know they’ll eventually get the hang of it and keep practicing until they do. Then they ride everywhere.”

The tomte in green, with his name in big letters embroidered on his coat, patted Gus on the shoulder and guzzled down the last drops of his Julmust. “See you soon.”

Gus sat with a thick slice of a Swedish Braid, his favorite 'go-to' bread, and drizzled it with an extra spoonful of white icing as he thought about what Petre had said. The two of them had been in the same baking class years earlier, and Petre had always found a creative and fun way to look at life. "Maybe, just maybe, he could be right this time, too," Gus mumbled, sitting up just a little straighter.

He took off his sock hat, removed the pencil from its custom pocket, and hooked the hat on the back of his chair. Sliding his empty plate aside, he pulled a clean napkin before him.

"Now," he said with his elbows on the table, his hands holding his chin covered with a pointy white beard, knocking the pencil rhythmically against his head as he thought. "I can draw a horse," and he put pencil to paper.

When he had finished, he sat back to look at his sketch. His face turned sour, and he took a deep breath, shocked by what he saw. It was certainly not a horse... or anything close to resembling one.

When his eyes returned to their smaller original size, he noticed all the Swedish tole-painted images decorating the restaurant. Many of the shapes he had seen at the wood shop were painted on beams and walls, creating vines of leaves and hearts around every window. Around the top edge of the walls was a long line of Dala horses, each painted differently. None were perfect...and yet they all were in their unique way.

"You know," said the thick voice of the cook from just above the heavy belly covered with a white apron that had approached the table. "A Dala horse was first carved by men away on a hunting trip in the evening by campfire light for their kids. Then, when they had carved so many more, they brought back the simple carvings for the kids to paint and sell. Now, a Dala

horse is an icon of Sweden. Who knew such a humble beginning would turn into a beloved character? It all starts from here,” the comfortable old tomte said, pointing to his head, “in your imagination. And from here,” he said, pointing to his heart. With a nod and a chuckle, the cook waddled back behind the counter and turned to see if Gus was watching. He waved his hand across the display of marvelous foods of the smorgasbord, then to his head and ended by patting his heart.

Gus turned the napkin over and started again. Then unfolded it and drew a different version in each quadrant. Every new sketch looked a bit more like a horse.

Now that he had the shape fairly close, he grabbed another napkin and drew a different pattern taken from those he could see from his spot as the restaurant filled.

“I get it...I think,” he said with renewed hope. He touched the pencil to his head and then his heart. “With these, I can create anything. Step one... is to start, and step two is to start again, and again. Everybody starts at some sort of step one, right?”

Gus collected the two napkins with designs in every corner, folding them neatly back into their square shape, and slid them into an inside pocket of his coat. The inspired tomte grabbed his hat, slid the pencil back into its pocket crammed it on his head, waved thanks to the cook, and was on his way back to the woodshop.

When he arrived, he slipped back into the empty chair near Petre, receiving an understanding nod from the tomte there. He reclaimed his misshapen figure, noticed the hairline crack giving away the fixed broken legs, and smiled.

*I know just what I can do with you,* he thought as he carefully sanded the neck to the long nose and ended at pointed ears at the very top. Looking at his project with kind eyes, he added. *You don't have to be perfect.*

"Not bad," Petre had come out of the ongoing conversations to acknowledge Gus's efforts. "Try your hand at painting next?"

"Can't wait. Tack! Thanks," Gus said as he left to find a spot at the painting table.

He happily chatted with the others at the long table as he sealed the wood and gave it a base coat of white, letting the fast-drying paint set. He pulled out his napkins, and selected the style he wanted, folding it so only that one showed, and started.

*Oh, so messy,* he thought. *Oh, so perfectly messy, my own design.* He had chosen to paint the whole horse glossy white and added dabs of red (his favorite color), blue, and gold for the saddle and smaller splotches in a line under the belly, across the chest, and fine lines creating a bridle. Then, with special care, he gave the horse two almost matching dots for the eyes.

*My mess, my unique design.* He hummed a little as he used brushes of smaller and smaller sizes, washing each one out as he finished with one color and choosing the next.

The shop was slowly emptying as the day was winding down. The tomtar were going home to family or checking on the younger tomtar who had volunteered to watch their farm for the day. And Gus had set his finished creation on top of the tiny spikes of the 'ouchy board' that allowed any paint to drip off the creation rather than pool around the feet.

Petre caught up with him and patted his back. "So, what do you think, *min van*, my friend?"

Gus puffed up a little, proud of having completed something on this day that had started out to be so boring. “I can’t wait to return tomorrow. Now that I’ve got the hang of it, I could help get more of these creations ready for Christmas. What fun to think of the children who will receive and enjoy them for years, maybe even a lifetime.”

“And this is an act of kindness we tomtar strive to do every year, at this time. Well done, Gus!”

As they parted ways, Petre smiled as he heard Gus say, “An act of kindness, shared, oh yes, yes, yes!”