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T'is the tail before Christmas
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Small farmers are desperately looking for the next exotic animal to rescue them from both penury and global warming, which promises to turn their fields into dust bowls and force them to migrate to southern California. Farmers have tried one creature after another--pot-bellied emus, singing tortoises, one-eyed deer that hop like frogs. African watussi cattle were going to be hot. But most Americans have not lined up for an animal whose main virtue is that you can drink blood directly from its neck.

Country Real Estate (CRE) decided to identify the next hot fad before it became one. We ended up in a place much like Nevada's Area 51 where no one disbelieves anything. We interviewed the seed-stock farmer who is ground zero. He's a jelly-belly of a man in his late 60s, but very active. He winked so much that I recommended an optometrist. The feds, he complained, had been bugging him for years. The Federal Aviation Administration wants to ground him for using only one running light during night flights. The IRS is suing him for exceeding the gift limit. He says he keeps on, because he's just an old-school guy: a chronic indoor smoker; promiscuous cookie eater; compulsive imbiber of 100 percent whole milk. He's chubby and plump--with a really high Body Mass. He insists on working only one night shift a year—how weird is that?

Work consumes him. He's obsessed with the production and distribution of material goods, but he's not a suit. You could mistake him for a hobo with his peddler's pack and snow-white beard. He always dresses down. Truth to tell, I don't think he changes his clothes very often. He's always in red fur, and every inch smudged with soot. He's such a mess that when I first saw him I thought he was one of CRE's reporters. To protect his privacy, CRE assigned him a randomly selected interview alias.

CRE: So spill the beans? What can save the American farmer?

Santa: Not beans, that's for sure. Beastly little suckers.

CRE: What's the next exotic breed? Be serious. I'm all ears.

Santa: That's exactly the trouble with the media these days—nothing in between them. Back when I was a buck, reporters knew how to hype a bad story.

CRE: Like what?

Santa: Like that New Yorker piece on Vladimir Pumpkin and Rudolph.

CRE: I missed that one.

Santa: One spooky night, this stealth helicopter lands behind the workshop. A dopey little dude struts out. Says his name is Pumpkin, and he can supply me with all the red noses I want. Pumpkin promises that his noses will glow

red forever. No-battery technology, he called it. So I ask myself, what's his gimmick for making noses permanently red?

CRE: Party membership? Vodka?

Santa: Neither. Then Sy Hersh hears about it. He reports that Pumpkin was selling bomb-grade plutonium flakes for nasal implants.

CRE: Did the New Yorker get it wrong?

Santa: Of course not. The offer was made, but I told ol' Punkin to take a flyin' leap into the Volga.

CRE: Why?

Santa: Well, I'd already outsourced the nose job to the Chinese. After all, who has the prettiest lead paint in the global economy? Who's always gonna be the low-cost producer of phony stick-on noses?

CRE: You're stalling. What's the next get-rich-quick exotic for farmers?

Santa: [His eyes lost their twinkle as he whispered.] Flyin' reindeer.

CRE: Oh come on.

Santa: What's more exotic—and practical too? Every lead-blooded American will want some.

CRE: What's the downside?

Santa: One small thing: they hang out on roofs, prancing and pawing with each little hoof.

CRE: Can they be yard-trained?

Santa: They prefer house tops. People will just have to get used to living under a stable.

CRE: They might do okay in Berkeley.

Santa: It's an obvious win-win for both farmers and the American people.

CRE: You have a monopoly on flying reindeer, right?

Santa: Yes, but I had to front all the R&D. I told the Federal Trade Commission that I'll let farmers in on the ground floor just after I double my price to account for costs seen in hindsight. Flyin' reindeer will be bigger than pet rocks, which farmers couldn't raise fast enough. Remember I was the guy who supplied breeding pairs for only \$5.

CRE: Breeding pairs of rocks?

Santa: Hey, if a customer saw dollar value in a pet rock, it wasn't that hard for him to find even more value in a fertile couple. You watch: somebody's going to start selling rocks to the Chinese. They're on America's learning curve.

CRE: Will flying reindeer be just another fad.

Santa: FAD! They're a product with legs. We've always had strong seasonal interest. Now, I want to move up from the tinkle winkle of little bells--and let those babies rip! All year. No more one-night stands and a Ho, Ho, Ho.

CRE: Maybe you can get farmers to raise them with enough federal incentive payments. But will Americans give up their Tundras and Vipers for Cupids and Blitzens?

Santa: The automobile is as dead as the dodo. Flyin' reindeer are cheaper and faster. No more traffic jams. No more greenhouse gases out the tailpipes. My reindeer will make America energy independent!

CRE: On behalf of a grateful people, Wow.

Santa: There is one problem. They mostly eat ice and snow. That's what keeps them miniature.

CRE: We can grind them a couple of cubes every morning, and they can be good to go.

Santa: Sorry. It has to be natural. They won't touch the artificial stuff.

CRE: [A long pause.] I think I see what you're getting at.

Santa: Right. Global warming. Ice caps melting. Glaciers turning into South Beach. Rudy and the boys will starve if we don't figure out something. Prancer's really ticked, believe you me.

CRE: Maybe it's not too late.

Santa: Maybe. I'm going to do my part. This year everybody gets a voucher for 25 percent off the jacked-up purchase price for their first two flyin' reindeer. That'll build the market for farmers who will then beat a path to my door—and save me shoveling. Everyone will be able to buy something small that will help to fix something big.

CRE: Gee, there really is a Santa.

Santa: Have you picked out the names for your pair?

CRE: Sure. Happy and Mary Christmas.

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