

Nick's Christmas Wish



by

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Nick's "Ho" was a deep, resonant thing. Pushed from his diaphragm with a tantric exhalation, it went through his voice box like a tuba blast, finally to be shaped into a warm tone in his carefully rounded cheeks. He ran the "Ho's" together— blurring the "H's"—so that it sounded truly like laughter and not just three nonsense syllables blurted on cue. Nick rehearsed his "Ho" until it was a spontaneous explosion of mirth from a vast, jolly old man who gave into laughter with childlike abandon.

His beard and belly were counterfeit for practical reasons, but of the highest theatrical quality. His fat suit was silicone sewn into a Lycra unitard interspersed with water-filled pouches to give it a jiggly heft believable to both eye and touch. His beard was human hair harvested from an insanely expensive wig and dyed snowy white with a hint of gray visible in the underbrush. It was mounted on a non-elastic strap that ran over the top of his head—under his custom-made snowy white hairpiece with bald crown—and meticulously latexed to his skin along the edges. He estimated that it could have held the swinging weight of a fifty-pound child. Subtle makeup added highlights of age to his face. The rest, he did with expression.

Of course, his suit, hat, belt, and boots were perfectly realistic. Well-made of sturdy, albeit faux, material and weathered just enough to suggest a long history of wear and fastidious care. However, these were just the external trappings of the icon. To really sell it, Nick knew he had to reach the heart of the character. He crafted an extensive backstory and did Meisner exercises for weeks to get the motivation right. He found a signature voice (a hint of Finnish accent) and postural cues (Alexander method crossed with a bowl full of jelly) that implied the mind of the man with every small detail. It was his mission to ensure that every child who sat on his knee, every parent that stood behind the camera, and every shopping passer-by would see him as nothing but 100% Santa Claus. But his investment in this job went beyond professionalism.

His friends had laughed when he'd landed this gig. Nick Carlucci, acting school dropout from Bensonhurst Brooklyn, working as Santa in an upscale Manhattan department store! They didn't realize what an accomplishment it was. Standing in line at the audition with a hundred hopefuls, each old enough to be his grandfather and every one looking the part twenty-four/seven, Nick certainly seemed like a longshot, to say the least. However, after suiting up on a sly trip to the restroom, once he stood before the judges in costume and makeup, the odds were very different. At the end of the day, the ranks of grandpas were sent home and Nick alone shook hands with the store's executive vice president.

However, to his buddies from the neighborhood, the scenario had endless comic possibilities they could not resist. There was the classic, crotch-grabbing retort for an obnoxious East-side urchin:

"Hey, kid... I got your Barbie Dream House right here!"

The inevitable come-on for the attractive single mom:

"Why don't you sit on Santa's lap and tell him what you want in your stockings?"

And the all-purpose dismissal for the wish beyond a reasonable scope:

"A freakin' pony? Fuggedabowdit!"

Instead of reindeer, pit bulls were suggested. A hand gesture to accompany "Jingle Bells." Perhaps a trip to the meat packing district in that fur-trimmed, red pimpin' outfit to yell "Yo! Yo! Yo!" to all the ho's.

Nick laughed along. Sure, they were crude swipes at easy stereotypes, but Nick had long ago learned that such things were useful to manipulate audience perceptions. Give them something they expect to see, then—bam!—hit them with something else that confounds the stereotype in depth and complexity. Challenge them to re-think their prejudices. The Santa role was just such an opportunity in Nick's mind, and every new child was another audience to win over.

A well-coifed mom wrangled a screaming one-year-old toward Santa's knee.

"Brandon! Brandon, please. Remember what we talked about. Now, Brandon, calm down. He's a nice Santa. See Brandon? He's nice. He's not going to bite you, Brandon."

Nick took Brandon. "Well, oh-ho, I'm not so sure about that. He does look mighty tasty!" Nick sniffed Brandon's head. "Mmm. Ho-oh, he smells like a gingerbread Brandon." He snuffed all around Brandon's auburn curls like a frantic bloodhound. "Oh but he does smell quite delicious!" He switched to a Cookie Monster voice (with a hint of Finnish). "Me eat Brandon! Ahmm-num-num-num! Oh, Brandon, good! Numm-numm-numm-numm!"

Brandon's mom left with a picture of Brandon laughing joyously in Santa's arms.

"Is that real?" asked six-year-old Dylan, crinkling his nose at Nick's beard.

"Why don't you tug it and find out?" suggested Nick. Dylan's hand moved tentatively toward the beard, a sadistic gleam in his eyes. "Of course," continued Nick, "If it is real, you would hurt me if you tugged on it. If it isn't real, and it pulled off, you would embarrass me in front of all the children. So which would you like to do, Dylan? Hurt me or embarrass me?" Dylan was bewildered into inaction. "Or maybe you can just believe in me, and tell me what your heart desires, and on Christmas morning you might find that, if you believe, magic can happen."

Nick held out an empty hand and turned it back and forth slowly before Dylan's wide eyes. He flicked his wrist and a candy cane appeared in his fingers. Dylan stared in awe, then confided his desire for a Cops-N-Robbers Super Stunt Crash Chase-N-Race Set. He left holding the candy cane like a sacred relic.

The candy-cane-up-the-sleeve gag had taken Nick many hours of planning and practice to get right. Between kids, he discreetly loaded a special pouch just inside his cuff. A quick twist of the forearm brought the candy cane rocketing into his hand faster than a blink. It was tricky to catch, but he'd worked it over and over in front of the mirror until it was seamless. ("Just like Deniro in 'Taxi Driver'!" a neighborhood chum had observed. "You talkin' to me? You talkin' to me, you freakin' pantyhose wearin' elf!")

Kaitlyn wanted a Beautiful Dream Princess Magical Ice Castle Playset with Real Snow-Cone Maker (ice not included). She also wanted to know why Santa lived at the North Pole.

"Well, you see Kaitlyn, I have an agreement with Father Time. As you may know, a day at the North Pole lasts six months, and a North Pole night is six months, too. So, as long as I stay at the North Pole, I only get one day older for each year that passes. This is how I was able to visit your grandparents, and how I will someday visit your grandchildren."

Kaitlyn laughed with glee at the magically appearing candy cane and ran off yelling that she really knew why Santa lived at the North Pole and that her brother, who had his own theory, was stupid.

"I want a Turbo Mach RC Road Ripper Extreme with Monster Grip Tires. The red one, not the black one. The black one's gay. And I want a Aqua Enforcer Pressure Pump Magnum Water Weapon. And a can of black spray paint."

"Now hold on a minute there, Kiernan," said Nick. "You're not going to use that spray on a wall, are you?"

"Oh no, Santa," replied Kiernan. "They only make the Aqua Enforcer in gay pink and yellow colors, so I have to paint it so it looks like a real gun."

"Oh-ho, I see. Ho-ho."

"Can I go on now, Santa? I've got a lot more."

Kiernan's mom eventually had to put down her cell and threaten him with no decaf mochaccino to get him off Santa's lap. He rejected the candy cane as gay.

Emma wanted a Dancing Ballerina Disco Hotspot Set, with all the sold-separately Ballerina Babies, except the brown one. Brendan wanted a Kung-Fu Cyber Lords Death Rumble video game with a lock-out code so he could keep his mom from turning off the Show Blood setting. Emilee wanted a Hey Girl! Junior Makeup Kit with Genuine Maxima Brand Lipstick and Eyeshadow Sampler. Carter Jacob wanted an Action Squad Master Rescue Vehicle with Official 9-11 Hero Club Certificate. Allison Amelia wanted a Pop-Goes-The-Diva Karaoke Kit with Video DanceSync® Technology to Place Your Head on a Real Pop Star's Body. Jander wanted a puppy, but it had to be either a Norwegian Elkhound or a Borzoi, purebred, with papers.

"Man, how do you do it?" asked Marie, as she fixed her elf-rouge in the break room.

"Do what?" asked Nick.

"Deal with that constant stream of kids for hours. You hardly even take a bathroom break! And each one, no matter how obnoxious or greedy they may be, you leave them with a glow, you know. A little of the wonder of Christmas."

Nick smiled. "Because that's what Santa does. He sees the good in every soul, no matter—is my bald spot on straight?"

"Yeah, it's fine."

"No matter how much the commercialism of our time might have crept in. He loves children, and he loves Christmas. And when that love is given freely, no cynical heart can withstand it."

Marie shook her head in admiration. "Wow. You are definitely the best Santa ever."

"That's because I am the real Santa," Nick replied with a wink as he put on his hat. "In accordance with store policy," he added quietly.

Marie laughed as they tromped back to work through the fiberglass snow.

Children came and went on Nick's lap for the rest of the afternoon. Marie flashed him the fifteen-minutes-to-closing sign just before the announcement was made to the line, which moaned as one. He made an effort to speed each child along, without having them feel rushed. Eventually he found a beige-skinned five-ish year-old boy with chaotic black hair and wary brown eyes deposited on his knee. The boy had an expression of sheepish anxiety and a hunched, submissive posture. Nick looked around but couldn't see anyone that seemed like his biological mother.

"And what's your name, young man?" he asked.

The reply was inaudible.

"Can you speak up a bit? I think I must have some snow in my ears." Nick pretended to scratch around in one ear then sprinkled flakes of plastic snow from his fingers. "Oh-ho. There it is! Now, say your name again, if you would be so kind."

"Julio."

"And what would you like for Christmas, Julio?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing at all?"

Julio shook his head.

"Then why did you want to come to see me?" Nick asked.

"I just wanted to wish you Merry Christmas."

"Why, thank you, Julio! How very thoughtful of you."

"And tell you you don't have to bring me any presents."

"Oh-ho? But why don't you want any presents, Julio?"

"Because last Christmas when I comed down there was no presents and Mama said it was because Santa was very busy and he didn't have time to bring presents to all the children everywhere in one night. It wasn't because I was bad, like when Poppy didn't come back, it was just because Santa has to work hard at Christmas and sometimes he couldn't find presents for everyone. But it doesn't mean that Santa doesn't love me. Santa's just very busy, so I don't want you to have to be too busy at Christmas so you don't have to bring me no presents."

Nick was silently stammering when a woman pushed her way past the artificial poinsettia-strung gate. She had black hair tied up in a messy bun, and under a battered overcoat wore the blue smock of the store's army of typically unseen cleaning staff. Under the smock was the brown uniform of a fast-food chain.

"¡Julio, venga aquí! Venga a mí ahora!" shouted the woman, pointing angrily.

Julio shrunk guiltily in Nick's lap. He looked from side to side as if for an escape, but it was a half-hearted search.

"¡Enseguida!"

"Sí, mama." Julio slid down off Nick's knee and took a step toward his mother. Suddenly, he turned around and flung himself against Nick's body, burying his face in fake fat and gripping the faux fur in his fingers desperately.

"I love you, Santa," he whispered.

A moment later, Nick felt Julio's mother pry his fingers loose and drag him away by one arm. As Julio trailed behind in his mother's tow, he waved good-bye with resigned finality.

Nick snapped out of his daze. He called out.

"Hey! Hey, kid! Yo! Yo! Yo, kid!"

Julio looked back and Nick flicked his wrist in a big gesture. The candy cane flew past his fingers and sailed over a cardboard gingerbread house. It landed with crack on the floor and skidded along the polished linoleum. Two blonde children dove for it and began wrestling in the aisle. Julio was dragged around a corner, out of sight.

Nick was still staring, mouth agape, when an elf placed Moira on his lap.

"I want a Fun Fashion Motorized Catwalk Set with Lady Kelly Katrina's Fall Collection Wardrobe and House Mix Music and Light Show and..."

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