

A X-Mas Story

by John Weil

Nervous Nick has been standing in the chilly wickedness of 42nd Street 4 hours at least, ringing his bell and requesting the fallen swingers who hurry by to shell out a little something for their less fortunate brothers and sisters. Nobody looks twice even though he's wearing red pajamas and a silver beard. You've got to understand that in this neighborhood his Santa Claus suit doesn't really stand out. Compared say to someone like Ulysses S. Lopez who throws a couple of bills into Nick's kettle as he struts like Flash Gordon in high heels. Once in a while one of Nick's old friends gives him the high ho and a splash of change. Karma Miranda, the cashier from the Foxy Arts Cinema comes up and throws her arms around him.

"Como esta, amigo?" she asks.

"The louses," Nick answers uncharitably. "It would take a monkey wrench to get money out of their pockets."

"Si," Karma replies knowingly. "Maybe it would be easier to just mug them, no?" And she bundles off laughing.

Another five, blue-fingered minutes and Nick is ready to fold up his stand and get himself a shot of something he

deserves. Instead he is cornered against the lamppost by a lady acquaintance, a certain Leilani Lipschitz, who mans the Jews for Jesus table in back of Bryant Park. “Nick!” she calls into his ear, while clamping him tightly against her zaftig breasts where a crucifix is tucked neatly inside. “Bless you, Nick! You didn’t tell me you were volunteering to work for the Lord?”

“They pay me \$2.75 an hour.” says Nick loosening from her grip.

“I don’t care,” Leilani says, all steamy, her eyes lit up brighter than the Linda Lovelace marquee just over her head. “People told me you were no good and I said wait and see. I defended you, Nick, ‘cause I just had this gut feeling that somewhere deep down under the scuzzy clothes and dirty mouth and perverted heart that you really loved the Lord more than booze or dope. And look at you. Was I right or was I right?”

Nick drapes his arm across her shoulders in a brotherly kind of way. “I’m afraid not, Lei,” he laughs as he squeezes her big left bosom. “Merry Christmas and God bless you.” he yells after her as she tears away.

“For that,” she calls back to him from a safe distance, “I can personally guarantee that you are going straight to hell!”

Nick laughs so hard he has to hold up his styrofoam stomach to keep it from falling out. It is such a barrel-bottomed ho-ho-ho that a few folks even go so far as to throw some moolah his way. And even though it is getting dark and down around 25 degrees, Nick is feeling pretty good.

“Senor Santa Claus.” says a little voice next to him with a yank at his sleeve.

“Watch it, boy,” cautions Nick to a dark-skinned kid who can’t be more than 7 or 8, “or you’ll rip off the rabbit fur.”

The boy stops pulling and looks up like a scared little rabbit himself. “I gotta tell you something, senor.” he says and two teaspoon-size teardrops fall out of his eyes.

“Hey, hey, sonny,” says Nick nervously on his knees and wiping the kids face with his sleeve. “What’s bugging you?”

The boy looks shy and then another storm of tears comes thundering out. Nick pats his little cap and tries to come on more fatherly. “That’s not cool to cry like that. Why don’t you just tell Santa what’s bothering you. Come on, stop bawling, will ya.”

The boy is still sniffing like a leaky drain but says, “I’m looking for my padre.”

“You lost?” asks Nick.

“No.” says the kid.

“Where’s your mother, then?”

The boy points up the street. “She’s still in the bar. But she don’t know where my padre is either.”

Nick thinks to himself that he is getting nowhere fast and maybe should try his detective style. “When was the last time you saw your dad?”

When he says this the kid starts crying all over again, but between wails Nick can make out, “I never see him at all. My mother marries another guy, but I know he’s not my real padre.”

Nick is stumped. "The kid is bazookas." he says to himself. "What's your name?" he asks hopefully.

"Jesus Ruiz." says the kid, the flood of tears subsiding a little.

"Well, Jesus." says Nick, "Why don't you just tell Santa Claus why you're on such a bumner? Maybe I can do a little something."

"OK." says the kid softly. He starts slow but has some nice moves once he gets going. "I come to New York from across the ocean. When I'm born even my madre won't tell me who my padre is and her family they get so pissed at her, they kick her out of the house. She borned me at the racing stables all by herself except for some guys who come to see what all the noise is about."

"Is this kid putting me on?" Nick mutters to himself.

"So we comes to New York but the kids here, they're not nice to me. They call me bastardo. They throw things at me. I'm not so big but I show them. I make a brick wall fall on Fernando's brother's new car."

"What?" says Nick incredulously.

"I turn Pedro's dog into a telephone booth. I'm not so big but I can do tricks they can't. They gonna be sorry they messed with me. And I got Virgin Mary on my side. In church, she tells me she's gonna help no matter what happens, but when I ask her about my padre she tells me nothing. I get so mad the priest kicks me out and I don't get to go back and talk to her no more."

"That's tough, kid," say Nick, "What do you want me to do?"

The boy looks really scared. "Maybe," he says sadly,

“You can tell my father to come get me, si?”

Nick is freaking. “But kid, I don’t even know your father.”

Which starts the tears all over again.” I know you couldn’t do nothing,” he cries and gets funny looks from some of the people passing by. “I knew it! You’re just like everybody else!” And while Nick is looking up and down the street for someone to help him get out of this jam, the kid sticks his hand in the kettle, grabs up all of Nick’s earnings and digs down 42nd Street heading west.

“Goddam!” yells Nick and starts after him. Then he stops. “What the hell.” he says to himself. “At least I got rid of the little bastard.”

He’s watching now as the kid heads toward Broadway racing across the street against the lights. 6 taxis, a bus and a semi are roaring down on him at 45 mph. Nick can’t look. He hears brakes howling. He looks up. There’s the kid in the middle of Times Square smiling away.

“Jesus,” thinks Nick, “It’s a miracle that kid didn’t get plowed under.” The kid’s waving at him like a flag now and Nick can hardly see him in the crowd but he’s standing under the street light and it’s shining on the kid’s head with a weird kind of glow. All shiny like a halo. Like a big circle of light with all kinds of power lines coming out of it. Like a lampshade, Nick is thinking.

“Jesus,” he says packing up his little stand, “I could use a good drink.”

