

SANTA CLAUSE

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Squinting through the dim street light seeping into the alley from Baker Avenue, Morrison gazed at the back of his hand, marginally amazed the soiled rags held up so well. The fingernails protruding through the loosely wrapped cloth were cyanotic, though that was probably from Old Rotgut rather than the frosty December night. A delivery truck rumbled past on Baker, disturbing Little Jack and Ringo, who mumbled curses regarding inconsiderate workaholics.

"You don't see me camping in *their* living room," Little Jack growled.

Ringo, named after the pop star because of a similarity of facial accessories, rolled over in his nest of newspapers. He fixed Little Jack with a rheumy eye and chuckled. "You'd first have to get in the door to stake a claim on their carpet, my foul-smelling friend. You know how unlikely that is..."

"I'll have you know I bathed in September!" Little Jack idly picked at a festering scab that marred his scraggly beard. "I know for a fact you didn't

take advantage of that unseasonably warm weather to join me."

Morrison closed his ears to the endless prattle. He had little use for either man, both in their late fifties or early sixties, which, upon reflection, was his own age. Morrison endured the constant arguing and name calling because the fear of screaming loneliness was too much to bear.

Vagabonds, that's what Ringo called their survival group. He detested polite media-editorial terms like "street people" almost as passionately as he hated "wino" and "bum", but that's what they were, Morrison thought. Bums and winos—dismal failures, the outcasts of society who either met Fortune as it was leaving, or missed the bus entirely.

"You got the bottle, Morrie?" Little Jack demanded.

Morrison dutifully patted the side pockets of his ratty overcoat. "I gave it to you," he said.

"I don't have it," Little Jack replied. He turned to Ringo, who suddenly burrowed deeper into his newspapers. "You freakin' weasel!" Little Jack accused. "You drank it all!" Digging about he eventually held up the empty bottle and shook it in Ringo's face.

Ringo whined between chattering teeth.

"There wasn't much left, Little Jack. It's so damn *cold!*"

Little Jack looked thundercloud angry for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. He tossed the bottle to one side, the glass shattered on the discolored brick of the adjacent building, the glittering fragments descended to the slush damp pavement with a brittle, tinkling song.

Little Jack dug into his pockets and came up with some cash. "How much you got, Ringo? What about you, Morrie? Can we put enough together for another?"

When Morrison remained silent, Little Jack wobbled to his feet and approached the stocky man hiding behind a thick beard heavily shot with gray. "Come on, Morrie, what are you saving it for? You know what tonight is—let's celebrate! Be a sport!"

Morrison knew this day was ritually venerated by millions of families annually as a time of giving; of pledging love and fidelity, peace and goodness; but he remembered it as the day he returned from a sales trip carrying bright-colored packages to discover his wife and children gone, along with all the money he had in the world and every stick of furniture they possessed. It was a tragic memory that haunted him with increasing bitterness as the years passed. Success eluded him thereafter, until

the unhappiness broke his spirit and finished his career, leaving him with so little dignity that life was a dreary existence garnered out of dumpsters, social handouts and panhandling.

The memory was especially strong this inclement December evening. Morrison suddenly reached into his pocket and brought out a fistful of change and two one dollar bills. "You're absolutely right, Little Jack. We *should* celebrate. Between the three of us, we ought to be able to get a bottle of good stuff—or three bottles of not-so-good stuff."

"I'll vote for that!" Little Jack cried. "Dig it out, Ringo. Let's see what you got!"

Wozenski's was two blocks over and south. The fat, cheerful proprietor was the only liquor store owner who didn't grunt or growl when the vagabonds drifted in for re-supply. He was especially cheerful this night, greeting them with a hearty hello. Wozenski let them "shop" in the store's bright warmth for a few minutes before gently prodding them for their order.

"I'm closing a little early this evening," Wozenski explained. "My daughter just turned five and she's expecting a visit from the old fat elf. What do you think of this?" he asked.

Wozenski ducked below the edge of the counter for a moment then reappeared with an intensely

white fake beard hooked over his chin. "I didn't get a suit, too expensive, you know, but this hat ought to do the trick." Wozenski settled a red stocking cap over his receding hair.

Little Jack clapped his hands. "You're a dead ringer, Wozenski. What a lucky little girl!"

Ringo moved up to the counter and put his money down. "We won't keep you. Merry Christmas, Wozenski."

As they headed toward the exit, each with a neatly creased brown paper bag cradled in their arms, Ringo leaned toward Morrison and whispered, "You look more like the guy in the red suit than Wozenski ever will..."

Wozenski startled them by calling out. "Wait a minute, fellahs." The proprietor came around the counter; a big man, larger than all three combined. The unkempt trio warily watched him approach.

"Something wrong, Wozenski?" Ringo stutted.

Wozenski grinned reassuringly. He paused at the end of the counter to grab bags of potato chips and pretzels then solemnly stuffed the food inside their coats. He made a shooing gesture with both hands, sounding a little embarrassed as he said, "Merry Christmas, guys. Now get along, I need to close up."

"You're a good man, Wozenski," Little Jack said. He hit the door first, moving quickly down the street with Ringo on his heels. They acted as if they expected Wozenski to retract his kindness.

Morrison drew himself erect and straightened his stained overcoat over his substantial mid-section. Wiping his palm on the rough cloth, Morrison offered his hand. "Thank you, Wozenski. I hope you and your family have a happy Christmas."

Wozenski returned the grip and placed a heavy hand on Morrison's shoulder, squeezing gently. "Take care of yourself, Morrie."

Morrison went outside, waving to Wozenski as the big man bolted the door. Moving north on Western, retracing his steps to the alley off Baker Avenue, Morrison listened to the crackle of plastic under his coat. He hated pretzels, but admired the fat shopkeeper's gesture; Morrison was permanently starved and no longer had the luxury of nutritional preferences.

The bottle of cheap table wine was heavy. Morrison slipped it into his side pocket and pulled out the pretzels. His fingers were too stiff to tear the plastic package, so he used his teeth, which wasn't much better since the gingivitis got so bad a few months back. The pretzels were too dry and much too salty so he put them back in his pocket,

intending to trade with Little Jack or Ringo for potato chips—if the old gluttons hadn't already consumed them.

The infrequent street lights along Western left pools of deep shadow between. Frightening places where a man might walk in—and never come out.

This was not an exceptionally well-patrolled area of town and the young men liked to prowl at night. Usually they left Morrison alone, content to jeer and heckle; to push and shove the old man amongst themselves until they tired of the game. Morrison, however, was not so complacent in their past behavior to delude himself that he was safe—because on the streets *no one* is ever *safe*.

His legs ached from the cold and his holey religious shoes bothered him. Walking had become such a chore over the last year. Morrison decided to take the alley short cut between Western and Baker instead of trekking a full block north to take advantage of the light on State.

The alley was poorly lit by dim light filtering down from second and third story apartments above. The atmosphere was rampant with pungent odors the freezing cold could not tame. Overflowing dumpsters and piles of discarded trash made it difficult to navigate the littered alleyway.

Morrison's heart pounded wildly when a stack

of trash tumbled at his left. "Who's there!" he stammered, clutching his coat tightly. The old man backed to the wall, mouth dry with fear. "*I ain't got nothin'!*"

A kitten's mewling came in response. Morrison exhaled slowly, a cloud of condensation wreathed his head as the sudden rush of adrenalin eased. "Where are you, little guy?"

Morrison moved through the garbage until he found a tiny tiger-striped kitten which had, of all things, a bright pink silk bow tied around its neck. "Where'd you come from?" he asked, tucking the feisty feline inside the neck of his coat. The kitten's claws dug through the fabric of his flannel shirt and the two t-shirts beneath that. Morrison chuckled.

"Aren't you a little young to be walking the streets this time of night? A fellah like you can get hurt here, but you're safe with me. You sure smell good. Is that perfume? You some little girl's pet? How'd you get here?"

Morrison heard a movement at the end of the alley. He looked toward the light and saw the silhouette of a young woman in a bulky coat. Her voice floated through the crisp night air like feathers after a pillow fight.

"Dixie? Are you in there? Don't play games with me, cat!" Her impatience was laced with

uneasiness. "Where are you, Dixie?"

Morrison felt the cat's purr thumping his chest. The brief fantasy of a warm companion who kept himself clean and never talked swiftly vanished when Ramona Rodriguez gingerly entered the alley way. He remembered her as a well-rounded, brown-skin, black-haired girl about sixteen years of age; regal as a queen—and as imperious. In many ways Ramona reminded Morrison of Heddie, the woman who stole his life and future without warning or explanation.

Holding his coat over the cat, Morrison suddenly decided it was time he took something out of life for himself. He tip-toed toward the other end of the alley, determined to keep the cat. He could give it more love and affection than the girl behind him, the girl who let a tiny kitten wander about instead of taking responsibility and caring for it.

Morrison had only traveled six steps before a terrified shriek, suddenly cut off, froze him in place. He looked over his shoulder to see Ramona ineffectually struggling with a powerfully built broad-shouldered young man.

Vinnie Barbero's evil chuckle rumbled in the darkness. "I guess it's time we had our *date*, Ramona. We're going to have a little party—just you and me."

Vinnie slammed the girl against the wall, knocking the breath—and most of the fight—from her.

Ramona sagged, crying pitifully. "No, Vinnie—" she pleaded. "*Don't!*"

Morrison's blood drummed in his ears. He tore his eyes away from the scene, longing for the bright-lit safety of Western Street. Vinnie was a hard-muscled mean kid, obviously drunk and ready to graduate from loud-mouthing how he owned the neighborhood to demonstrating it.

Morrison knew he could quietly sneak away and disappear because Vinnie was preoccupied keeping Ramona quiet while struggling with her clothes. Part of him wanted to make that escape, yet the girl's muffled whimpers tore Morrison apart.

He faced that awful moment when external events dictate a person's most intense response, the inner self one can never escape, or confront with logic or reason. Morrison had heartbeats of time to make decisions no person can manage when given ample opportunity for reflection; the human brain always rationalizes non-violent methods for dealing with violence—until a life-threatening situation requires immediate reaction. A drowning man clutches at straws simply because

he must—and Morrison silently picked up a long slat from a broken packing crate and rushed Vinne Barbero for the same reason.

"Let her go!" Morrison cried as he swung the heavy wood at Vinnie's back.

Vinnie Barbero, young and strong, a veteran of inner city wars, spun out of reach. Street light coldly reflected from the steel blade in his right hand. Vinnie held Ramona's mouth shut, pinning the woman to the unyielding brick. His voice was harsh, filled with anger. "Go away, old man, before I kill you!"

"Let her go!" Morrison cried a second time. He swung again, the blow erratic from age and wastrel living, yet the threat was sufficient to cause Vinnie to jump back. Ramona screamed, slipping to the pavement in a tight huddle. Vinnie cursed as lights came on overhead.

"*You sorry old man!*" Vinnie shouted. He jumped forward, slamming into Morrison as he escaped down the alley.

Morrison felt a terrible ache below his ribs, but his first thought was for the kitten. He pulled it out of his coat and it purred, sleepy-eyed, and began to squirm because of the cold. His second thought was for Ramona. He knelt down, keeping his distance.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Get away!" Ramona cried.

"It's me—Morrie," Morrison said gently, with great sadness. "Here's your cat."

The old man dumped the kitten into the girl's lap and slowly rose, favoring the side Vinnie bashed when the young man fled. He was still trying to catch his breath.

An angry male voice shouted from above. "What's going on down there?"

Morrison didn't have the strength to answer.

Ramona pulled herself up the wall, her face tilted upwards. "Who are you yelling at? *Mind your own business!*"

The window slammed shut and the alley was silent, except for the distant strains of carolers somewhere in the next block. Morrison reeled into the light on Baker Street and leaned against the building gasping for air. His heart thudded like a trip hammer beneath battered ribs. Morrison fumbled for the bottle and tore off the cap. The too sweet cheap wine did not seem to steady his nerves.

Ramona came out of the alley, clothes tattered; the heavy mascara streaked down her cheeks, the too-red lipstick smeared across her pretty face. She cradled the tiger-striped kitten to her jacket,

rubbing her chin against the animal's soft fur.

Ramona Rodriguez trembled violently—and the whites of her eyes showed it wasn't the December chill alone which affected her. Morrison offered some fatherly advice.

"Watch out for Vinnie. He's a bad one."

"I can take care of myself!" The girl sneered, though her confidence was shaken. As a belated afterthought she added: "Thanks for finding my cat."

Morrison smiled. He inclined his head as any good cavalier might do. "You're welcome. Merry Christmas."

Ramona stiffly turned and moved away. Morrison watched her go. He was mildly astonished when the girl hesitated under the street light. She looked at him as an angry child who had just suddenly realized how narrow is that step between childhood and the ugly real world. She nervously stroked the cat and abruptly lowered her eyes. The young girl visibly wilted, stifling a sob.

"*Merry Christmas, Morrie!*" she cried, and ran up the street. Ramona disappeared inside one of the brownstones.

Morrison felt curiously weak from the unexpected excitement. It took him a long time to cross Baker Avenue and enter his alley. Little Jack and

Ringo had a fire going—a *very* tiny fire carefully concealed from the cops, who frowned on such things.

"Where have you been?" Ringo asked as Morrison wearily dropped to the pavement behind the wind screen of cardboard boxes.

Morrison leaned against the brick wall and closed his eyes. He smiled slightly and said, "I delivered a Christmas present to a pretty girl."

"Geeze, what a kidder!" Ringo chuckled.

Little Jack made a disparaging sound. "It's a crock of you-know-what. Have a drink, Morrie." Jack offered his bottle to Morrison.

When Morrison failed to respond, Little Jack shook him, then jerked back with horror. The stout man's coat fell open to reveal a massive red stain soaking Morrison's tattered shirt below the off-white beard.

"*Christ!*"

Ringo slowly moved forward and gently pressed cold fingers against Morrison's throat. A moment later he looked up, eyes wide. "He's dead!"

Little Jack looked down at the quiet form and rubbed tears out of his eyes. "That's the way it is, Ringo. It's part of the Santa clause: 'You can't hang around after coming down the chimney.'"

The End