

# A Visit From St. Nicholas

by  
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Jimmy was very proud of himself. His ninth birthday had come and gone, six weeks ago, just before Hallowe'en. And Christmas was just around the corner. He was going Christmas shopping for his family, with his mother and aunt. And, wonderfully, his mother had realized he was growing up. "You're old enough to do some shopping by yourself," she'd said. "We'll leave you in Toys. Pick out something for your little brother and sister. Then go over to Men's, right over there, and find something for your father. After that, meet us up in Women's Wear, one flight up. I'm trusting you to behave, and do this all on your own, because you're old enough to do some things by yourself. Don't let me down!"

"I won't, Mommy," he'd said, his mind full of the things he could do all by himself in the big old department store. The women had headed for the escalator, and he'd pretended to look at little kids' toys, for his brother, until they were out of sight.

Now for the important stuff! He rushed over to where the littler kids were lined up with their mothers to see Santa, but he didn't join the line. No, he had other plans.

Standing off to one side, he checked the sign. Yes, Santa was due for a break in a few minutes. He'd finally find out what Santa did when he wasn't taking kids' requests for presents. Sending off telegraphs to the elves, no doubt, to let them know what he'd found out, updating the Naughty and Nice Lists, that sort of thing.

He watched as the line of mothers escorted their nervous or excited toddlers up to Santa, who effortlessly extracted from them the fact that they'd "been good" and what they wanted him to bring them on Christmas eve. Then the elf-lady put the velvet rope across the path up to Santa, tousled the hair of the little kid waiting, and told him that Santa needed to take a break. The kid was disappointed but willing to wait for Santa to come back.

At last! Jimmy would find out Santa's secrets – how he got word back to the Pole, and all that! Practicing his Junior Detective skills, he slinked along, seemingly interested in the toy trains, as Santa got up from his throne and walked toward a 'Staff Only' door. As Santa went through the door, Jimmy smoothly slipped through behind him. Seeing a skid full of boxes, he hid behind it. Santa walked over to the Staff Lounge and went in.

Jimmy scanned the area from behind the boxes. Nobody around. He walked out from behind the boxes and, moving quietly and ready to take cover, darted over to the door of the Staff Lounge, which was partly ajar. He looked in.

Santa had taken off the coat of his Santa suit, revealing a somewhat hairy chest with an A-line 'wife-beater' undershirt. That made sense, thought Jimmy; it's hot in the store, so Santa will just wear underwear under his Santa suit. But what he saw next shocked him.

Santa took off his Santa hat – and then his white hair and beard! He was just an old man, with gray hair and no beard. He reached into an old refrigerator and took out a beer.

"I don't know how you can put up with the little brats, Fred," the woman at the table said. Jimmy recognized her; she'd waited on his mother before, and always seemed to be looking down her nose at him.

"Aaah, they're good kids, mostly," Santa, or rather Fred, said. "Playing Santa, it gives them something to believe in. After the holidays, me and the missus are going down to Florida for a winter vacation.

This cold weather plays hob with my lumbago. And the check for playing Santa makes a nice nest egg for the vacation."

Jimmy's heart broke. Santa wasn't real; he was just a fat old man who worked for the store for a paycheck! With a sob he ran, out of the staff area, across the toy department, down the stairs, and out the front door of the store. Down the wintry street he pelted, ignoring the cold and the startled looks, heedless of where he was running. Finally, out of breath, he fetched up in the courtyard of the Orthodox cathedral down the street, throwing himself onto a bench in front of a statue of a skinny bearded bishop with robes, crook, and mitre. He began to cry.

A few minutes went by, and he was beginning to feel cried out, when he discovered there were arms wrapped around him. Startled, he looked up, to see a boy his age, with blond hair and bright purple eyes, looking at him with concern on his face but a big warm smile. "Hi, I'm Peter," he said. "You're Jimmy, right?"

"Yeah," Jimmy answered, not sure how this kid knew him – he'd never seen him before. But what happened next totally startled him.

Peter looked up at the statue. "This is the kid, Nick," he told it. And the statue stepped down from its pedestal, squatted down, and said a blessing over Jimmy. And Jimmy realized that Nick wasn't speaking English, but he understood him.

"C'mon," Peter said. "We got some stuff you need to see."

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They appeared in the bedroom of a teenage girl. "Don't worry," Peter said. "They can't see us or hear us." The girl was arguing with her father, in that other language Jimmy could suddenly understand.

"I won't!" she said.

"You don't understand," her father said. "I owe the Governor twenty talents in gold. If I don't pay it, he'll sell us all into slavery. But he's willing to write it off if I marry you to him, because he wants a beautiful young bride. And here and now, we have no choice: either I marry you off to him, or we all become slaves."

"But I don't love him, I love Demetrios!" she sobbed.

"Nevertheless, the law requires that you do what I command," her father said. "If there were another way, I would take it gladly. But I will give you in marriage to the Governor tomorrow, to save our whole family. I love you, Lucia, but I must think of all our family. So no more arguments!" He rose and walked out. Lucia almost robotically washed out her stockings, hung them by the chimney to dry, and then threw herself down on her pallet and cried herself to sleep.

"That's horrible!" Jimmy said.

"Watch," said Peter. Then it was like in the movies, when the camera pans back. Outside the window was Nick, who had been eavesdropping on the argument. As Lucia fell asleep, Nick reached into his

robe, took out a large pouch and an empty smaller one. From the big pouch he counted out twenty gold coins, put them in the smaller pouch, and eyeballed the room. With a careful overhand toss, he flung the smaller pouch with the gold coins in it through the window towards the chimney, where it fell into one of Lucia's stockings, hanging there to dry.

"That takes care of the debt to the Governor," Peter said with satisfaction. Jimmy just grinned.

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They were in an alley outside a window. "There's a famine," Peter said. "People don't have enough food, especially meat." Three little boys, still chubby with baby fat, were playing in the alley, with no adult or older kid around.

The butcher walked out the back door of his shop into the alley. Jimmy immediately knew him for a Bad Man; everything about him screamed 'evil'. Jimmy watched in horror as the man lured the boys into his shop with sugar cookies, then killed them and tossed their bodies into a barrel full of brine. "He's going to wait until the commotion over their disappearance dies down," Peter said, "then cut up their bodies and sell them as cuts of meat." Jimmy looked like he was ready to throw up. "Watch," Peter said again.

As they watched through the window, Nick led a detachment of Roman soldiers, resplendent in shiny armor and helmets, into the shop. As the soldiers arrested the butcher, Nick went over to the barrel and began praying over it. And the three little boys came back to life! Nick helped them out of the barrel, and led them out the door.

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The two boys were sitting in a big old domed cathedral. There were a whole lot of bishops there, making speeches. And while Jimmy could understand the words, they didn't make a whole lot of sense to him. "Grown-up stuff," he thought to himself.

One of the bishops started speaking, a younger man of maybe 25, wearing a miter but beardless, and all the others seemed to be paying attention to what he was saying. Then Nick walked up and slapped the younger bishop across his face, and launched into a speech of his own, and all the other bishops stood up cheering when they heard what he was saying.

As Nick finished, he walked over and sat next to them. "What was that all about?" Jimmy asked Peter.

Nick smiled; obviously he could hear and see the boys, even though apparently nobody else could. He paused in thought for a moment, then asked, "Tell me, Jimmy, why is Christmas special?"

That was an easy one. "It's Jesus's birthday," Jimmy answered.

"And why is that important?" Nick asked.

Jimmy thought about that question. Peter piped up, "Because on the first Christmas, God sent his son to be a human baby," he answered.

Nick gave him a warm smile. "That's right," he said. "That guy, Arius, is kind of a jerk, He was saying we shouldn't celebrate Christmas, because Jesus wasn't really God's son."

"That's why you slapped him?" Jimmy asked.

"Pretty much," Nick said. "You don't want a theological explanation, full of complex stuff. But that's what it boils down to."

"Good for you!" said Jimmy. "He had it coming!"

"That he did," Nick agreed.

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Peter took Jimmy to several other places, where they watched Nick give people things they needed. Then, "It's time to get you back," he said to him.

"Omigosh, we've been gone so long! My mother will have a cat!"

"Don't worry," Peter said. "You'll be there in plenty of time." And he transported them back to the toy department of the department store, just after Jimmy had gone running out. "Now, what do your brother and sister want for Christmas?"

"Well, she likes My Little Pony stuff. But that's...."

"Just what a little girl her age oughta be interested in," Peter finished. "Think about it."

Jimmy did. "Yeah, you're right," he allowed. "I'm gonna get it for her." Peter grinned, and looked at the Big Wheels. "That's just what he was asking for," Jimmy said. "I told him...."

"...that they were just for little kids," Peter said. "How old is he, anyway?" Jimmy thought that one through, and nodded again. He made the two purchases, and had them wrapped.

"Oh, there you are!" It was Jimmy's mother.

Peter handed Jimmy an envelope. "Give this to your parents Christmas eve. See ya!" And he vanished.

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It was Christmas eve. The TV was blaring out specials full of forced Christmas cheer. Jimmy looked up at his father. "I wanna give my presents tonight, Dad," he said.

"You'll still have to wait until morning to open your own," he told him.

"Yeah, that's okay. I got a reason for wanting to do it now, though," Jimmy said. Smiling, his father nodded his agreement. Jimmy went and got his sister's present and handed it to her.

She tore it open. "Oooh, eee, eee! It's just what I wanted!" She was all smiles and excitement.

Jimmy was watching her happiness, with a big warm smile on his own face. He didn't notice his parents looking on with smiles of their own, as their oldest learned how to give from the heart.

Then his brother. And he was all excited about his Big Wheel, wanting to take it out for a ride then and there. "It's too late and dark right now, squirt. But I'll race you to the corner tomorrow," Jimmy told him.

"You'll beat him on your bike," his sister said. "You go way faster than he can."

"Naah," Jimmy said. "Betcha on his Big Wheel, he can go just as fast as me!" His little brother grinned at hearing that. Jimmy caught his father's eye, and winked; his father beamed back.

"Oops, I almost forgot," Jimmy said. He ran up to his room and grabbed the envelope Peter had given him. Zooming back down the stairs, he handed it to his father, who looked at it quizzically and started to open it. Just then there was a knock on the door; Jimmy's mother answered it.

"Omigod!" his father exclaimed, as his mother and a boy in a delivery uniform in his late teens walked back into the room. "Come here, dear, and look at this!"

"What?"

"It's a cashier's check, and the amount looks to be, to the penny, exactly what we need to pay off the mortgage on the house," Jimmy's father said.

His mother stood next to him and looked. "There's a note with it," she said.

But the note didn't have anything to do with the check. It said, "This should set some of your worries to rest. Please transport Jimmy and his packages to the Rescue Mission," and was signed "Nick."

"What packages?" Jimmy's father wondered aloud.

"Well, sir, I have 40 packages I was told to deliver here, to a Jimmy Thorpe," the teen said.

"That's me," Jimmy said.

"Here," the teen said, handing him the bill of lading. Across the top was Jimmy's name and address, then a listing saying 40 misc. packages, wrapped. Below that was scrawled, "You'll know what to do with these," signed "Nick."

"Hmmm," Jimmy's father said. "This is mysterious. But I'm not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Go get your jacket, Jimmy. And let's get those parcels loaded into my truck."

Grinning ear to ear, Jimmy did just that.

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When they got to the Rescue Mission, Jimmy saw there were a lot of people around, including a lot of kids, who were sucking on candy canes and some of them playing with dime store toys. He and his father brought the packages inside and set them down on a table.

And Jimmy noticed, when he looked at a kid, one package would start glowing, a different package for each kid. Jimmy was sharp enough, he figured that out. It was more of Nick and Peter's magic.

He looked at one kid, a boy a couple years older than himself in a thin jacket. One package started glowing; Jimmy went and grabbed it, and gave it to the boy, who opened it. "Hey, a quilted jacket! Neat! And it's got a Rangers logo on it, too! How'd you know that's my team?"

Then it was a little girl. The package that glowed for her turned out to be a pink frilly dress and some plastic costume jewelry, a tiara, a scepter, and a necklace, that turned her into a little princess. She was ecstatic over the present; her mother smiled at Jimmy.

A boy in his early teens got a Louisville slugger bat, baseball, and fielder's glove. "Hey, thanks, kid!" he said gruffly, and Jimmy could see that he was trying to keep from crying.

Jimmy handed out all 40 packages. Each was tailored to be precisely what the kid in question needed or wanted. He felt really good about what he was doing.

As he sat down next to his father, who gave him a hot chocolate, after finishing the distribution, the first boy, whom he'd given the jacket to, brought his mother over to them. "Mom, this is the kid that gave me the jacket!"

"Thank you, young man. Your generosity is wonderful. Billy's needed a new jacket, and I've been trying to stretch things to be able to afford it...."

Jimmy interrupted her. "'S okay," he said. "But all I was, was the delivery boy. They're all presents from St. Nick." His dad and Billy's mother exchanged a glance and a knowing smile. But Jimmy knew.