

NURSE NANCY'S WONDER LOVE

Christmas Eve

As the bleak morning sun casts dappled shadows on the kitchen wall, Nurse Nancy carefully fills a pitcher with ice cubes from the refrigerator. Next she adds cold water until the ice cracks and condensation begins to form on the outside. Gently she places the jug on a tray along with a small glass, a drinking straw and a white linen serviette. Then lifting the tray, she slowly climbs the stairs.

Treading softly, Nurse Nancy enters the bedroom where her father lays motionless. Her mother is sitting at the foot of the bed, tenderly entwining the transparent fingers of her husband's gaunt hand in her own, a silent tear moistening her wrinkled cheek. "How long can he go on like this?" The old lady's question is uttered as a plea for divine mercy.

"I wonder," murmurs Nurse Nancy. With efficient movements, she pours the ice water into the glass, and inserts the straw. Propping up her father's emaciated shoulders with her arm, she lifts his head and touches the straw to his mouth. The old man pulls back his transparent lips, revealing toothless gums, but he does not drink. As Nurse Nancy lays his head back on the pillow and wipes his brow with the napkin, a low moan escapes his chest. Then there is only silence. After a minute, his eyes begin to glaze. Nurse Nancy presses his wrist to find a pulse, but none is there. Finally she rests her hand over his heart, and feels only a peaceful stillness.

"Has he gone to a better place?" Her mother's eyes search her daughter's face.

"I wonder," replies Nurse Nancy, as she nods to confirm his death. Lovingly she closes her father's eyes for the last time. Then mother and daughter cling to one another in a desperate embrace of sorrow and devotion.

A short while later, Nurse Nancy summons the priest and the funeral director, who make appropriately consoling visitations. When the doorbell rings again, her mother says, "Who can that be?"

"I wonder," answers Nurse Nancy. When she opens the door a tall, dark and handsome stranger is standing before her.

"Hello. My name is Dr. Chad Pitt," says the man. "I'm the County Coroner. It's my task to file a report when someone - passes away - in their home." His words are capable and confident, but his penetrating blue eyes are kind.

Nurse Nancy obligingly lets the doctor in, and he immediately commences his routine to fulfill his official duties. When he is finished, he looks directly at Nurse Nancy and says, "You have a very beautiful - home. Thank you for allowing me to be your guest today. I'm sorry it had to be under such unfortunate circumstances. In my experience, it's especially sad to lose a loved one during the Christmas season. It was late December when my wife passed on... But perhaps we'll meet again sometime on a happier occasion."

"I wonder," says Nurse Nancy, as the doctor's hand grips hers in a powerful handshake, and she shows him to the door.

That evening, Nurse Nancy kneels in front of the Christmas tree in the living room, saying a silent prayer. To humour her mother, she had decorated the house for Christmas, in hopes that her father might remain well enough to share the special day with them one last time. And so the stockings are hung by the fireplace, and the artificial tree is decked with lights and tinsel. However, in keeping with the sombre mood associated with her father's illness, Nurse Nancy has hung a crucifix, instead of a star on the highest branch of the tree. The weight of the statuette causes the slender limb to droop and sway, so the body of Jesus appears to sag more than ever on its cumbersome cross. It is to this forlorn figure that Nurse Nancy addresses her prayers for her father's soul.

Her mother had retired to bed right after dinner, worn out from the prolonged vigil of the past weeks and months. But Nurse Nancy is fulfilling a sacred obligation to seek a benediction for her father's spirit, before his final day on earth comes to a close. And so she lingers to offer up her prayers. However, after several minutes of fervent supplication, she too is overcome with exhaustion from both the events of the day, and the long ordeal of her father's demise. And so she lies down in front of the fire, and is soon peacefully asleep on the living room floor.

As the hall clock strikes midnight, Nurse Nancy stirs in her slumbers, and realizes she is not alone. The fire has burned down to a few smouldering ashes, but by the glow of the Christmas tree lights, she can see a tall figure standing before her. His body and face have all the features of Dr. Chad Pitt, but he is dressed in a dapper suit of scarlet spandex that accentuates his muscular physique. "Hey Nurse Nancy," says the stranger, with a charming familiarity that Dr. Pitt hadn't manifested, considering the sober nature of his visit. "Call me Santa Claus," he laughs, reaching down to where Nurse Nancy lies on the carpet. "Heaven knows, I've been called far worse names. Ho Ho Ho! Some even say I'm quite the devil" he swaggers. "Would you like to take a ride in my sleigh?"

"I wonder," thinks Nurse Nancy, as he lifts her to her feet.

"Come, my dear - the reindeer are waiting," exclaims this incredible Santa Claus character. Then he adds with a grin, "Trust me, this will be a night you'll never forget!" Locking her hand securely in his grasp, Nurse Nancy slowly drifts through the fireplace opening and then up the chimney. When they reach the roof, the self-proclaimed Santa Claus helps her to find a comfortable spot in his sleigh. Then he commands his reindeer to fly to the top of the next building. From house to house, into one chimney after another, Nurse Nancy floats and flies with her extraordinary escort all night long.

At every fireplace they encounter on their journey, Nurse Nancy notices with surprise that her red-clad companion seems to derive vitality from the warmth of the smoking coals below. The brighter the embers glow, the more he thrives on their heat. "I wonder," ponders Nurse Nancy, as she watches him cavorting gleefully through the flames.

Then at one stop, her Dr. Chad Pitt-Santa Claus turns to Nurse Nancy with a serious gaze that burns deep into her soul. "There are twins living here," he says. "But the family is too poor to afford stockings for them. Would you like to help?"

"I wonder," breathes Nurse Nancy.

"If you would give me your panty-hose, I could leave treats for both children after all. One leg for each twin." Her remarkable new friend rubs a warm, reassuring palm over Nurse Nancy's thigh, as he whispers his request into her ear. Nurse Nancy, eager to make a contribution to this night of

enchantment, willingly kicks off her shoes and begins to pull down her unmentionables and wriggle herself free. Attentively, her Santa Claus caregiver places his strong, competent hands around her waist to steady her as she climbs out of her undergarments. Then with a shiver of exhilaration, she surrenders her lingerie unconditionally into his custody. Displaying his gratitude for her selfless act of kindness and generosity, her Santa Claus super-hero bends down and embraces her lips in a long, tender kiss. Then he holds her intimates before him, and swiftly stuffs them until they overflow with his bounty.

For Nurse Nancy, the rest of the night is a marvellous, surreal blur. When her Santa Claus pilot finally guides her safely back down her own chimney, he looks into her face with his sparkling eyes and bewitching smile. "Thanks, little helper! You were awesome," he chuckles, giving her a squeeze. "But now I gotta fly. The elves, you know!" he winks. Then with a devil-may-care wave over his shoulder, he calls, "Luv ya, Sugarplum! Good-bye, and Merry Christmas! And just wait till next year! Ho Ho Ho!"

"I wonder," says Nurse Nancy, watching his blazing red silhouette vanish up the flue in a puff of smoke.

Christmas Morning

When Nurse Nancy awakes, the grey light of a December dawn is filtering through the window. Slowly she peers around the living room, in an attempt to gain her bearings from her unfamiliar position on the uncomfortable floor. Then the tragic events of the day before flood back to her, and she realizes she has slept all night under the Christmas tree. Gingerly sitting up, she stretches her arms and legs, and suddenly discovers she isn't wearing panty-hose. Glancing around to track down her dainties, she is startled that they are nowhere to be found. Then she recalls her reverie rendezvous with the fiery apparition who claimed to be Santa Claus, and her midnight joy ride in his sleigh. "I wonder," says Nurse Nancy aloud.

"Pardon?" asked her mother, who has just entered the room.

When Nurse Nancy tells her mother about her amazing supernatural adventure, she omits several details, particularly the part about her panty hose, and also Santa Claus' resemblance to Dr. Chad Pitt. Still, the old lady can not stop repeating, "Bestill my beating heart!"

"I wonder," is all Nurse Nancy replies.

Christmas Eve Next Year

Preparing an early lunch, Nurse Nancy pours a serving of rich, hot soup into a bowl. She puts the dish on a tray on which there is already a soup spoon, a small teapot with steam coming from its spout, a matching china cup, and a small glass of water. Mounting the stairs, she enters her mother's bedroom. There Nurse Nancy places the water glass on a night table beside the bed, just beyond her mother's reach. Then she composes herself in a chair, enjoying the soup and sipping her tea.

Watching her daughter eat, the old lady's face portrays a desperate lust for nourishment that only someone in the final stage of starvation could express. Her mouth hangs open, and her tongue moves uncontrollably, craving some simple morsel of solid food, no crumb of which has passed her lips for weeks. Her nose, which rises prominently from her sunken cheeks, is tortured by the

hearty aroma of the savoury broth, whose flavourful goodness she can only imagine. But although Nurse Nancy's mother is too weak from hunger and thirst to move or even speak, her eyes still demand answers. "Why have you done this to me?" they scream. "And what will become of you?"

Regarding her mother from above the rim of her teacup, Nurse Nancy reflects on the questions the old woman's eyes convey, and silently responds, "I wonder."

An hour later, as Nurse Nancy is tidying up the kitchen, she hears a loud crash upstairs. Checking on her mother, she finds her dead in a pool of water on the ground, with the drinking glass shattered in her hand. But even in death, the old lady's eyes glare up at her daughter, searching for the truth. Determinedly, Nurse Nancy shuts her mother's eyelids, blocking her accusing gaze forever.

After hefting her mother's corpse back onto the bed and cleaning up the mess on the floor, Nurse Nancy makes several phone calls. When the priest and the funeral director arrive, she dispenses with them in short order. Then she arranges herself for her next inevitable visitor. Dr. Chad Pitt, looking handsome as ever, is as professional and debonair in his manner as she remembers from their first meeting. The coroner expresses his deepest regrets that she should have suffered the misfortune of losing both parents on Christmas Eve, and just one year apart. He also remarks on the patience and devotion necessary to care for two elderly invalids suffering through extended periods of affliction. As he is about to leave, his blue eyes meet Nurse Nancy's and he affirms, "Your life will certainly change from here on."

"I wonder," says Nurse Nancy, as she watches him descend the front steps.

For dinner, Nurse Nancy finishes the rest of the soup she'd prepared earlier in the day. Then she retires to the living room. Nurse Nancy has kept all the Yuletide decorations there intact since the Christmas before. So the stockings still adorn the fireplace, and the crucifix is still dangling from the Christmas tree. Every evening for the past year she has prayed to the image of Jesus in his Christmas shrine. But since last Christmas, her daily vespers have always focused on the living, not the dead. And despite her mother's passing only hours before, tonight is no exception.

Nurse Nancy prays so hard that the knuckles of her clenched fists turn white. When she is done, she carefully removes her panty-hose and throws them into the fire. Watching as her scanties shrivel and sizzle, she revels in her newfound liberty. Finally she curls up on the hearth to sleep. Just before she slips into unconsciousness, she sighs, "I wonder."

Christmas Morning

Nurse Nancy wakes, blinking at the light of day, and realizes it's Christmas. She stares up at the brightly lit tree and tries to remember any special events, dreamt or otherwise, from the wee hours of the past morning. But she can't recollect anything happening since her prayers the night before.

Suddenly Nurse Nancy notices that the crucifix is missing from the top of the Christmas tree. Then she sees it sticking inexplicably out of the opening of her mother's stocking over the fireplace. Getting up to investigate further, she finds a small bulge in the toe of her own Christmas stocking. Reaching in, her hand feels something soft, and she pulls out a pair of panty-hose. "I wonder," says Nurse Nancy, with a nervous laugh.

Nurse Nancy makes herself a cup of tea and is sitting by the Christmas tree when the telephone rings. "Hello. This is Dr. Chad Pitt," says the voice at the other end of the line. "I know this is Christmas morning, but I'd like to come by to visit you today. Would you mind?"

As Nurse Nancy lays down the phone and hurries upstairs to fix her hair, she keeps repeating over and over, "I wonder... I wonder... I wonder ..."

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