

The Makings of a Saint

According to the Funk and Wagnalls Encyclopedia, "The legend of St. Nicholas tells of his surreptitious gifts to the three daughters of a poor man, who, unable to give them dowries, was about to abandon them to a life of sin." Rumour has it, that the doting gentleman tossed the money for the girls through their window. Or maybe he just dropped it down the chimney... For this act of mercy, St. Nicholas has been revered world-wide ever since. However, despite his kindly deeds and superhuman powers, our familiar Santa Claus, the perpetuator of the St. Nicholas myth, has never achieved acceptance as a credible god by the powers-that-be in the heavenly pantheon. So perhaps there were forces at play to deny St. Nicholas his divine destiny, right from the beginning ...

One December Afternoon in Turkey - Third Century AD.

The bookmaker peered up from where he sat, squinting through his one good eye. "Have you lost your knack with the horses, Peter?" he asked in his raspy rattle. "You haven't won on a single race this afternoon, my friend."

"A pox on you for reminding me," growled his client. In exasperation he threw down his empty purse and ground it into the dirt with his heel. "Bazzar, you half-blind bandit - I spit on you - Tphuuhhh. There. Everyone in Turkey knows how you've fixed horse races, camel races, even the running of the goats, to swindle your own mother. May she rise from the grave to curse the day she brought you into the world!"

"With customers like you, my friend," said Bazzar, calmly pouring over his hieroglyphic chalk marks, "I have no need to be dishonest."

Peter sneered down at the gloating bookie. "I notice you only call me a friend on those days when I lose," he said. "I prefer the days when we are enemies."

"You've been a good friend for a long time," smiled Bazzar.

The two men paused briefly, to replenish their mental arsenal of personal barbs, and savour the bitter solace they found in each other's company. Bazzar was stout and swarthy from many hours spent in the sun. Peter had a lean build, like the racehorses he lusted over, and was dressed entirely in black.

"And how are your lovely twin daughters, Elvira and Elfreda, my friend?" resumed Bazzar, unfazed. "They appear to grow more nubile with every passing day."

"How dare you desecrate my daughters by uttering their names!" bellowed Peter. "And I have three daughters, as you well know." He glared at his enemy.

"Such a pity that Moustasha, as the eldest, must marry first, before the twins may seek husbands," chided Bazzar with a crooked grin. "In your pawn-brokering business, I believe she is what they call a white elephant... "

"Why do you insist on mentioning my daughters' betrothal?" Peter snapped. "I would gladly strangle them all before I would let them marry the likes of you."

"You are right, my friend," replied Bazzar. "It is useless to discuss marriage and your daughters in the same breath. Without dowries, they have no worthy prospects. Poor girls. Tsts tsts tsts... They are destined for a life of prostitution."

"And why do you spread lies that my daughters will never have dowries?" demanded Peter. "Some day soon, one of my long-shots will payoff, and they will have money enough to marry princes!"

Bazzar, who despised Peter for the loser he was, never let an opportunity pass to remind him of the folly of his gambling addiction. He leered up at Peter. "I've bought a stable of fine stallions with your gambling losses, which were once the profits from your pawn-shop," he wheezed. "You could have used the money to provide handsome dowries for all of your daughters." Bazzar's pudgy shoulders shook with laughter. "By Jove, can you imagine?" he guffawed. "Poor Moustasha will need a dowry the size of Mount Ararat! Or possibly a miracle of the same proportions," he cackled. "But I'm afraid she's just going to be the hungriest hooker in all of Turkey instead."

"Meddling slanderer!" Peter exploded. "Your taunts of me and my family have exhausted my patience. The time has come for you to pay for your insolence!" As a pawnbroker, Peter was convinced of his natural superiority in the greater social order, compared to the parasitic Bazzar. And he felt fully justified in displaying his scorn by physically abusing the handicapped handicapper, who fed off the misfortune of others, and himself in particular.

But as Peter was reaching across Bazzar's blind side to yank the bookie's scruffy goatee, a short, corpulent man, with a full white beard broke in. "I believe we have a debt to settle," said the new arrival addressing the bookmaker. "I bet half a silver piece on "Prancer" to win in the fourth. You promised to pay sixty to one."

Peter's eyes widened with greedy glee, as he watched Bazzar sorrowfully consult his chalk strokes, and subsequently hand over several stacks of coins to the newcomer, who needed three bulging money bags to hold all his winnings. While the other two men were preoccupied with their dealings, Peter surreptitiously retrieved his battered purse from the sand. "You have a skill for picking a horse, Sir." He offered the offhand remark to the stranger, while twisting the strings of his empty purse.

"Not a skill exactly," the newcomer replied. "More precisely, an infallible system employing the venerable Oriental art of Feng Shui. I learned it from the widow of a Mongolian general." He tied his money bags to a cord around his waist, and quietly chuckled, "Ho Ho Ho." Then he bowed to Peter and Bazzar. "By the way, my name is Nicholas. I am a pedlar and Feng Shui technician, travelling from the north. At your service."

When the two men had properly introduced themselves to Nicholas, Peter demanded, "Now tell us all about Feng Shui, and how it can be used to choose a winning horse. Hurry. Before the last race."

"Feng Shui isn't a shoddy betting shortcut, my good man," explained Nicholas condescendingly. "It is a precision tool for controlling every aspect of life. By using Feng Shui, the enlightened may channel the mysterious forces of the earth, known as chi, to gain advantage."

"What do you mean - cheat to gain advantage?" blurted Bazzar. "I let you win, didn't I?"

"Your hearing is as wretched as your eyesight, you ignorant idiot," Peter hissed at Bazzar. Then turning to the pedlar, he stroked his cheek judiciously and said, "Mr. Nicholas, if you're passing through town, you'll need a bed for the night. Teach me about Feng Shui, and you can stay at my house." Continuing to squeeze his empty purse, Peter eyed Nicholas' bulging money belt. "Also, I'm a pawn-broker myself. So we might exchange... some merchandise."

"A very generous offer, Sir, which I accept," said Nicholas. "And from what I overheard of your earlier conversation, you and your daughters are in urgent need of the power of Feng Shui. To bring serenity to your surroundings and your lives."

As he couldn't afford a horse, or even a camel, Peter rode back to town with Nicholas in the pedlar's cart, which to his surprise was pulled by a large deer. Peter had never heard of such an animal being domesticated before. However, the beast willingly leapt forward on Nicholas' command of "On Cupid", which led Peter to believe that the deer, like everything in Nicholas' world, must be under the mighty spell of Feng Shui.

During their journey, Nicholas explained the intricacies of Feng Shui to Peter in more detail. He told how the earth radiated an inscrutable force, known as chi, which travelled in a north-south direction. This force exerted influence over every element of nature, including human activity. So it was important to recognize its power, and learn how to direct its flow positively, in order to achieve health, wealth, wisdom and love. The ways of chi could be fathomed through the discipline of Feng Shui, which provided a code for optimally arranging the environment, and particularly the home, to ensure the chi passing through reached all the right places for personal well-being. According to Nicholas, through years of study and application, the devoted student of Feng Shui and master of chi, could develop deep insight into all aspects of life, and acquire seemingly extraordinary abilities.

As the heavily laden cart rumbled along the street behind Cupid the deer, Peter looked around, trying to experience the chi flowing by. All he felt was wind. And a sprinkling of rain. Regarding Cupid's rear quarters wagging straight ahead, he hoped it actually was rain. "I still don't understand how Feng Shui applies to horse racing," he said.

"One must examine all the prevailing conditions of the race, and determine how they are affected by the chi," responded Nicholas. "The position of the track, the weather, the temperament of the horses. All must be observed and calculated in reference to the chi."

"Those are the same things I look at," Peter thought to himself. "Except for the chi double talk. But my picks don't pay off." The pawnbroker was accustomed to dealing with man-made items, and assessing their material value. So he was having difficulty coming to grips with the earthly relevance of Feng Shui and its ethereal chi. Peter squeezed his empty purse tighter than ever, as they pulled up to the front door of his home.

That Evening

On their father's arrival at the pawn shop, Moustasha, Elvira and Elfreda immediately rushed out to make a fuss over Cupid, who seemed to enjoy their attention. All three girls were in

their teens. Elvira and Elfreda, who were attractive, identical copies of each other, took after their mother, who had died in childbirth. They had cute, pixie-like features, and wore simple tunics and leggings, with little beanies covering their frizzy hair. Elvira's clothes were red, and Elfreda's were green. Moustasha was taller and darker than her sisters, with wiry limbs and angular bones. Obviously she resembled Peter, especially in those less desirable physical traits a female might inherit from her father. It appeared that she had undergone all of the ravages of puberty, but received none of its blessings. Already, she was at least a year past the normal marriageable age for a woman.

While the girls carried on, Nicholas regarded Peter's shop with a look of dismay. "Just as I suspected," he said. "The chi is all wrong. I can feel it from here." He took a small metal bar tied to a string from his pack, and let it swing suspended until it came to rest. "This simple scientific device is made from a material called nickel, and it always points to the north," he said to Peter. "It indicates how the currents of chi are flowing, and it is absolutely accurate, anywhere in the world. In fact, there is a so-far unproven theory, that at the North Pole of the earth, where the field of chi is exceptionally concentrated, there would be enough force on a metal object such as this, to enable a person holding it to fly. I heard this hypothesis from the widow of a Greek philosopher. One day I'm planning to take Cupid with me to the North Pole to test it out for myself."

"So what's wrong with my house?" asked Peter impatiently.

"As you can see," said Nicholas, gesturing with his metal rod, "The door faces south, which allows the chi to flow straight out." The pedlar frowned. "I won't be able to walk through the door. Is there another entrance?"

"No," said Peter, who was getting hungry and cranky.

"Then I'll have to go through the window," said Nicholas, climbing inside with his pack over his back.

Once in the store, Nicholas began rearranging furniture, and setting out items from his pedlar's sack, to improve the state of chi in the dwelling as much as possible. He hung a picture of lotus blossoms in the living room, to inspire peace and harmony, and placed two red candles by Moustasha's bed, to ignite passion and romance. He instructed Peter, who sat watching him in silence, that he should store his money in a ginger jar kept on a high shelf, and not under his mattress, if he ever wanted his savings to grow.

After dinner, which was prepared by Moustasha, Peter confronted Nicholas in front of the lotus blossoms. "When are you going to tell me the real secrets of Feng Shui?" he demanded. "All I've seen so far are worthless gimmicks pulled from your bag of tricks."

"Mr. Peter!" exclaimed Nicholas, astounded at the pawnbroker's belligerence, "You can't expect Feng Shui to bring happiness and success over night. Many years of patience and dedication must be invested to comprehend the energy of chi."

"I can't afford to wait years, you itinerant interior decorator!" yelled Peter. "I've got three daughters without dowries. I've got to make things happen now!"

Nicholas looked down, and scratched at his beard. "Well, I do have one item in my pack that can produce virtually instant results," he said. "Would you like to see it?"

Peter regarded the pedlar warily, as he rummaged down to the bottom of his sack. Finally, Nicholas pulled out a carved wooden triangle, with what seemed to be handles at two of the points, and leather straps and chains dangling loose. He held the contraption up for Peter's inspection.

"Is this another of you flim-flams?" asked the pawnbroker, who had no idea what he was looking at.

"Certainly not, Sir!" replied Nicholas, eyeing the black-garbed pawnbroker up and down. "You strike me as a man who is interested in his personal appearance." The pedlar looked questioningly at Peter, who slowly nodded. In actual fact, Peter, who had always wanted to own thoroughbred horses and compete on them himself, was extremely concerned about keeping his body in racing form. So he was more intrigued than he let on by Nicholas' strange machine and its possible connection to physical fitness.

"What you see here is a device called The Ab-Dominatrix," continued Nicholas. "It was given to me by the widow of a Roman gladiator. If you position it so, and bend this way a hundred times every day, you will notice amazing results in your stomach muscles right away." The pedlar handed the Ab-Dominatrix to Peter, helping him with his first few manoeuvres to ensure he was moving correctly. "Can you feel it working?" he asked Peter, who grunted his agreement. "It only takes three minutes a day. And after just three days, if you haven't lost three thumb-widths from your waistline, I'll give you your money back," promised Nicholas.

"How much does it cost?" asked Peter, suddenly sitting upright. "I lost all my money today at the track."

"It's a one-of-a-kind item," warned Nicholas. "So I was hoping to sell it for a premium price. But maybe we could make a trade for something of value from your shop," he suggested.

After some consideration, Peter rose and went to the "Rare Book" section of his store. There, he picked out a scroll, which he handed to Nicholas. "I'll trade you for the "Gospel According to St. Matthew," he said. "It's one of those Jesus books, that are getting quite popular. But this is an original. I got it from the widow of a Jewish tax collector." Peter saw no reason why Nicholas should be the only one entitled to assign dowager pedigrees to his wares. "She claimed it was passed down through her husband's family for over two hundred years. I think someone like you would like it. You can read it tonight. If you don't want it, you can take your Ab-Dominatrix and leave in the morning."

After Nicholas had taken his scroll and gone to bed, Peter toiled long into the early hours at his writing desk. At last, he wrote "Amen" at the end of his work. Then he stepped on the newly written parchment a few times, and ripped it here and there. Finally, he rolled it up, and on the outside wrote, "The Gospel According to St. John". Pushing "The Gospel According to St. Mark" and "The Gospel According to St. Luke" aside to make room, Peter placed his self-styled scripture beside them on the "Rare Book" shelf.

Then, listening to confirm that the rest of the household were all asleep, Peter gathered several chunks of coal from the fireplace and tiptoed to the bedroom where Nicholas lay snoring. Silently he emptied the silver coins out of the pedlar's money bags and into his own purse. Refilling the sacks with coal, he tied them back up, and stealthily left the room. Before going to bed, Peter hid the stolen money under his mattress, where the ill-gotten lump made a comforting pillow.

The Next Morning

As dawn broke, the activities of the new day were progressing calmly, as if engulfed by a tranquil wave of morning chi. While Moustasha and her sisters cooked breakfast, Peter was attempting his first serious workout with his new Ab-Dominatrix. Lying on his back, with the formidable instrument clenched tight against his belly, he rocked labouriously back and forth, breathing heavily with each lurching cycle.

Suddenly, Nicholas burst into the quiet setting, still dressed in his red pajamas. With a whoop of joy, he ran to Peter, hugged him close, and gave him a kiss on both cheeks. "Peter, how can I ever thank you?" he cried. "I've just gone through "The Gospel According to St. Matthew". And already it's brought a whole new direction to my life. Ho Ho Ho! I'm so happy!"

The pawnbroker and his daughters gaped in speechless disbelief at the raving pajama-clad pedlar. "Last night, when I began reading about the wise men and the presents they brought to Baby Jesus," exclaimed Nicholas, "I decided to devote my life to bringing gifts and happiness to others. Especially children. But this morning, when I finished Jesus' death scene, I knew I'd found an even greater calling. A cause worth dying for!" Nicholas spread his arms wide. "Ho Ho Ho! I'm going to crucify myself, and become a God!" he laughed. "Good-bye gold, frankincense and myrrh. Hello immortality! What a plan! And it only takes three days! If it worked for Jesus, it can work for me! I believe! I believe! I believe! That's all that matters!" Nicholas knelt in front of the pawnbroker. "Peter, please say you'll help me. I know I can count on you. You gave me the scroll. What an inspiration! I want you to be my disciple... Please, please, Peter. Tell me yes. Swear on your Ab-Dominatrix!"

The pawnbroker assessed Nicholas shrewdly, calculating the benefits his death would bring. "Let's start right now, then," he said.

Moustasha moved beside Nicholas and bent down to speak into his ear. Softly, she asked in a fuzzy whisper, "Mr. Nicholas, Sir, would you like some oatmeal?"

"Excellent suggestion, my dear," Nicholas replied, patting her head. "That's the very thing! A hearty breakfast to start my penultimate day on earth. I'll need to keep up my strength, so I can perform as many good deeds as possible. For today, I must go all over town and give away every last one of my belongings. I won't rest until my sack is empty! Ho Ho Ho!" Nicholas' mirth got the better of him. "What fun that will be! And then tomorrow," he said, clicking his bare heels in a merry dance, "I will die!"

"Can we go with you? Can we go with you?" cried Elvira and Elfreda in duplicate unison. The young girls eagerly ran over to the old pedlar, and climbed onto his knee. Together they whispered into both ears at once, telling him all the things they wanted from his pack.

"Of course you may come along, my dears," said Nicholas, poking their dimples. "And don't worry, I'll save something extra special for the two of you! Now let's eat!"

"This is the last food we have in the house." Moustasha offered the pot of gruel first to Nicholas, who took a spoonful for himself and passed it on to Peter. Oblivious to the hungry eyes of his daughters, the pawn-broker gobbled up the rest of the porridge from the pot. Then with a loud belch, and a twinge of inner guilt over his gastronomic excess, Peter silently promised his Ab-Dominatrix a penance of a hundred extra repetitions, every day for a week.

Nicholas quietly pushed his untouched bowl toward Moustasha. Then he took Elvira and Elfreda by the hand. "Come along girls," he said. "Ho Ho Ho! It's time to play!"

That Evening

"Cupid! Stop, old pal! We're here!" It was late afternoon when Nicholas arrived back at the pawnbroker's shop. Elvira and Elfreda spilled out of the empty cart onto the cobblestones, each with a carrot for their pet deer.

"What a wonderful day we've had!" Nicholas cried to Peter and Moustasha, as he clambered through the front window. "The people in this town are so openhearted and friendly! After choosing their gifts from my pack, they insisted on giving us sweetmeats and goats milk in return. Ho Ho Ho!" Nicholas rubbed his protruding belly. "I've never eaten so much in one day in my life!"

"Did you bring any food back with you?" asked Peter, whose breakfast had been digested for quite some time.

"Of course, Peter!" the pedlar-philanthropist replied. "There's enough to make a fine dinner for us all. And as this will be my last supper here on earth, I especially want to share the occasion with you and your family."

As Nicholas distributed the savoury delicacies, all dripping with honey, he reminded everyone, "This food is what my body is made of." With his rotund figure trembling like jelly, he licked his fingers and added, "Eat it in remembrance of me. Ho Ho Ho!"

To wash down the sticky treats, Nicholas passed around a vessel of goats milk, still warm and fresh. "This milk, provided by our neighbours' generosity, will renew our blood," he said, taking the first swallow, "Drink it with me, and you may also have the milk of universal kindness flowing through your veins." Nicholas saw to it that Peter was the last to receive the pitcher, so his daughters weren't denied their share.

When the pawnbroker had taken his final gulp, draining the last drop, Nicholas touched the money bags tied around his waste and announced, "Moustasha, Elvira, and Elfreda, in the short time I've been here in your home, I've come to love each of you as if you were my own daughters. And as I'm headed for a place where money is unnecessary, I'm leaving my savings for the three of you, so you will all have dowries." Screaming with ecstasy, the girls ran to hug the old pedlar. "However," continued Nicholas, ruffling their curls, "There's one important stipulation attached to my thirty pieces of silver. Because of the value of this bequest, it must be transferred strictly according to the considerations of Feng Shui, in order

to bring the greatest happiness to each recipient. And so my girls, tonight before you go to sleep, hang one of your stockings by the fireplace. And in the morning when you wake up - Ho Ho Ho! - your dowries will be waiting!"

"What presents have you got for us right now?" interrupted Peter from his dark corner.

"As a matter of fact," said Nicholas, reaching into his coat, "I did save some gifts for everyone." Again, the girls crowded close to the pedlar. "For Moustasha, I have a book called the Kama Sutra. It was given to me by the widow of a Hindoo Rajah. Just before her sati. There are many beautiful pictures in it, and I hope you and your future husband will enjoy reading every page." Moustasha accepted the book, and gave Nicholas a kiss on the cheek. The pedlar then turned to Elvira and Elfreda, and searched up his other sleeve. "For you two, I have a scroll describing the Oriental healing art known as acupuncture. Plus a collection of pins. They were a gift from the widow of a Chinese physician. If you both study this ancient medicine closely, you'll become adept at helping and curing others. In the meantime, you can use the pins to keep your beanies on straight. Ho Ho Ho!"

While the twins were fiddling with their hats, Peter asked, "Don't you have anything for me?"

Nicholas thought for a moment and replied. "You may have my pedlar's cart."

"Was it a gift from some lonely-heart widow too?" asked the pawnbroker.

"No," said Nicholas. "I won it from the loser of a horse race. That's why I think you should have it. Just like it says in the Gospel of St. Matthew. Chapter Five. The meek shall inherit the earth."

"Are you saying 'meek' equals 'loser'?" demanded Peter.

"I'm only quoting Jesus," shrugged Nicholas.

"What good's the cart without the deer? Can I have him as well?" Visions of venison steaks were dancing in Peter's head.

"That's for Cupid to decide for himself," smiled Nicholas. "Now I'm going to bed. Girls, don't forget to hang your stockings by the chimney! Goodnight! Ho Ho Ho!"

Nicholas spent several hours re-reading the Gospel of St. Matthew, until his candle eventually flickered out. Later, in the darkest hour of the night, he awoke to find Moustasha standing in her nightdress by his bed. In one hand she held the Kama Sutra, and in the other was one of the red candles from her sleeping chamber. "Mr. Nicholas, Sir," she whispered, "I may never find a husband of my own. And tomorrow you are going to die. But tonight, we have each other. And this mysterious book. Will you explain it to me?"

Nicholas made room for Moustasha to sit beside him. "Suffer the little children to come unto me," he murmured. "For of such is the Kingdom of Heaven." Reassuringly he drew her head against his shoulder. "Let me tell you a story," he began. "All about the young widow of a prince of Araby, who had a magic lamp. Whenever she rubbed it the right way, a marvellous

genie would come out and fulfill all her wishes." As Nicholas stroked Moustasha's hair, the wondrous book slowly spread open in her lap.

Just before dawn, Moustasha gave Nicholas one last kiss and left his side. Then the pedlar hitched up his red pajamas, untied the bags from his money belt, and crept onto the roof. Following the flow of chi, he slid down through the smoke hole and made his deposits in the stockings waiting below. When he finally returned to bed, the warmth of Moustasha's passion still lingered under the covers.

The Next Morning

"He came last night!" He came last night!" Elvira and Elfreda danced around the kitchen, squeezing their bulging stockings, while Moustasha stood quietly by, smiling to herself.

"Hey! Stop that." Peter cut into the festivities. "Didn't you listen to what Mr. Nicholas said about keeping our money safe? Now give it to me." He snatched the infamous sacks from his children's hands, and stuffed them into a ginger jar, which he placed high out of reach. Hurt and confused, Elvira and Elfreda gazed up at their father with tearful dismay. Nicholas arrived on the scene just in time to hear the pawnbroker threatening to beat his children if they told anyone where the money was hidden. "And if Bazzar ever finds out," concluded Peter, "I'll skin you all alive!" Then turning to Nicholas, whose red pajamas were still covered in ashes and soot, Peter demanded, "So are you ready to kill yourself?"

"Absolutely," answered Nicholas. "It looks like a marvellous day to die. I just need to locate the best place for my crucifixion." With those words, he took out his metal rod, and wandered into the field behind the pawnshop. After circling, pivoting, and back-tracking for the better part of an hour, he finally stopped beside a mangy pine tree. His dangling nickel bar was spinning wildly on its loop of twine. "There's no doubt about it," he declared. "The chi is never wrong. I'm to meet my destiny here. At this spot."

"Then let's get on with it," said Peter.

While Nicholas embraced Elvira and Elfreda, and shared a wet, unavuncular kiss with Moustasha, Peter fetched several lengths of sturdy rope. Regarding the uneven shape and spindly nature of the tree, and the spreading girth of Nicholas, Peter remarked, "We'll have to hang you upside down. It's the only way you'll fit."

"The Lord's will be done," replied Nicholas. But the pawnbroker's simple plan was more easily devised than implemented. After several false attempts, Peter finally propped Nicholas face-up on Cupid's back beside the tree. Tying his ankles tightly together, he stretched his legs high in the air, and drew the rope through the upper boughs. Then with a series of tugs, twists and mighty shoves from all his helpers, Nicholas was at last hoisted aloft, and suspended by his heels, high on his pine tree cross. Before he could start to slump, he was quickly and firmly lashed to the trunk and branches at the knees, hips, shoulders and wrists.

Throughout the ordeal, as Peter became increasingly tired and irate, Nicholas became ever more serene. When the job was complete and Nicholas was strung up in his pajamas, sprawling like a huge red star against the scrubby tree, he winked at Peter. "Bless you, old

chap," the deity-in-waiting said. "Splendid work. You don't know how much I appreciate all you've done. Look out Heaven, here I come! Hallelujah! Ho Ho Ho!"

"I've gotta see a man about a horse," muttered Peter, walking away. "You're going to have to die without me."

After he was gone, Nicholas said to Moustasha, "Listen closely, my dear. While I'm en route to Heaven, I want you to bury me here under this sacred tree. But not too deep," he reassured her. "I won't be staying underground very long. And I also want you to take the dowries for Elvira, Elfreda and yourself, and put them in a safe place where Peter can't find them. I didn't leave the money behind for him to gamble it away. Do this right now. Before your father gets back."

"Father would kill me and my sisters if the money went missing," answered Moustasha. "He doesn't care about any of us. Look at how he's left you here to die."

"As it says in St. Matthew - Blessed are you, when men revile you and persecute you for my sake," Nicholas proclaimed from his evergreen perch. "But rejoice and be exceeding glad, my child," he smiled. "For great is your reward in Heaven. Now run along and get those thirty pieces of silver. They're the key to your future on earth."

That Afternoon

"You have a new stallion in your pasture," observed Peter. He and Bazzar watched the bookmaker's latest acquisition together. The horse was a fine specimen. Black, sleek and strong, it stood taller by a hand than all the rest in the field.

"So you approve of my handsome prince?" asked Bazzar. "His name is Blitzen. I bought him and his sister Donner - the mare over yonder - from the widow of a Hun warri..."

"Shut up!" cried Peter. "I've heard too many stories lately about too many goddamned widows!"

"Such an exceptional lady," continued Bazzar. "She even told me that Donner and Blitzen meant "Thunder and Lightning" in her native tongue."

"Let me see him run," said Peter. "That's all that counts. Then I'll decide if he's worthy of the name "Lightning"."

"As you wish," said Bazzar. The two men approached the stallion, who suddenly bolted from the pack and raced away at a furious pace.

"He seems too high spirited to be trained," remarked Peter. "I'll give you ten pieces of silver for him, my friend. No more."

Bazzar crooked his neck, so he could study the pawnbroker out of his sighted eye. "So we are friends today, are we Peter?" he queried. "How pleasant. I'd noticed your manners were uncommonly civil. And with the softening of your heart, you've also decided to dabble in

horse-trading? That's wonderful!" Bazzar smirked. "Your pawnshop must have had a booming day of business to provide such a fortune for you to invest!"

"Insolent rascal! Have I ever asked you where your money comes from?" demanded Peter.

"My money usually comes from you, my friend," replied the bookie. "After every race you bet on. But our talk of mere money is inconsequential. Blitzzen is priceless. I could never part with him. Not even for... thirty silver pieces... "

"Thirty pieces of silver!" gasped Peter. "Finally, I have absolute proof of the robber that you are!"

"Not even at that price," Bazzar shook his head. "For if I were to lose possession of Blitzzen, it would leave a hollow space in my heart that would be almost impossible to fill..."

"Then you want Moustasha from me too? Is there no end to your greed?" Peter pretended his best to sound offended.

"Actually, I had Elvira and Elfreda in mind," replied Bazzar matter-of-factly.

"God help me!" cried Peter. "For I am surely in the presence of the Devil Himself!" He made the sign of the evil eye in the bookmaker's direction. "Bazzar - may you burn in Hell for all eternity - you must understand one truth above all else. I didn't raise my daughters to become concubine-harlots for the amusement of a lecher like you!" Peter shook his fist at the bookmaker. "To think I once considered you a friend! Let that be my last mistake! You may keep your wild horse, my evil enemy! Just leave my daughters alone!" Turning his back on Bazzar, he called over his shoulder, "And may Almighty God ensure our paths never cross again!"

"Till next time then!" waved the bookie, relishing the pawnbroker's theatrics. Confident that Peter's frustration and hatred would succumb eventually to his craving to possess a racehorse, Bazzar watched him stride away, silently calculating the odds on how soon he'd return.

That Evening

As the sweltering afternoon heat slowly gave way to the cooling shadows of the setting sun, Nicholas' crucifixion was progressing on a predictable course. By now every part of the pedlar's body hurt. His muscles and bones were cramped and sore, his upside-down head ached as if it was ready to burst, and the pine needles poking through his pajamas were making him itch all over. And every time he squirmed within his bonds, Nicholas' discomfort edged up a degree. So the pedlar-god tried to rest as quietly as possible in order to minimize the pain of his awkward position - occasionally offering a silent prayer to St. Matthew, to plead for a timely release from his afflictions. Gentle Moustasha made sure he always had water to drink, patiently waiting after each sip as he swallowed slowly in an upward direction, while Elvira and Elfreda laboured together, sharing a shovel to dig out his final resting place. Between their spells of spadework, the twins practised their soothing acupuncture, sticking pins into his hands to relieve the kinks in his neck, as prescribed by their scroll. Even Cupid

helped out, giving Nicholas' face a refreshing lick now and then, and sweeping the flies away from his eyes.

Moustasha, who had stood by Nicholas in his distress all afternoon, finally had to leave him momentarily to fetch more water. A few minutes later, she returned from the house, her eyes brimming with tears, and her fists full of coal. Running to the crucifixion tree, she let the black rocks fall to the ground. "Mr. Nicholas, Sir!" she wailed, "The money's gone! The sacks were full of coal, not coins!"

"Our stockings were stuffed with coal! Oh no! Our stockings were stuffed with coal! Oh no!" Elvira and Elfreda simultaneously joined in their sister's lament.

Through her tears, Moustasha explained to Nicholas how she had followed his instructions and climbed up to retrieve the dowries hidden in the ginger jar. Tempted to have a peek at the treasure inside, she had opened one of the sacks and found nothing but lumps of coal. In a panic, she had torn the other two money bags apart, and found only more coal. "Mr. Nicholas, my father knew all along there were no coins in our stockings," she sobbed. "No wonder he grabbed those sacks so quickly and hid them before we could find out."

"There, there, my child," comforted the suffering Nicholas. "When I become a god, I'll find some way to protect you and repay you. But tonight, for safety's sake, when your father comes home, be very careful what you say."

"Say about what?" Peter's voice cut through the evening gloom before his silhouette emerged from behind a clump of bushes. Dressed as usual in black, he was carrying a torch, which illuminated the crucifixion scene with an eerie tremulous glow. "Do we have a problem?" he asked.

"No Father - Yes Father," Moustasha spoke up, unsure of what Peter had overheard. "I'm just sad because Mr. Nicholas is dying."

"Haven't you finished committing suicide yet?" Peter addressed Nicholas. "You can't be very good at it. If you want some more help I'll get another rope - to wrap around your neck."

"Thank you Peter," replied Nicholas, "But I'm doing just fine on my own."

After his futile verbal joustings with Bazzar, Peter was enjoying this conversation, where his bullying remarks were allowed to go unchallenged. "All this torture and wailing remind me that I need some grief myself," he chortled, turning to go. "If you change your mind about that rope, Nicholas, you know where to find me. I'll be tied up in a private session with my Ab-Dominatrix. But I'll gladly help you out."

As the pawnbroker headed toward his shop, Elvira and Elfreda suddenly began pelting his retreating figure with pieces of coal. "You've stolen our dowries. You've stolen our dowries," they chanted together.

Like an enraged black bull, Peter stopped in his tracks for a moment, his eyes blazing. Then he charged back at his twin daughters, swinging his torch wildly and knocking them down. "You ungrateful little spies!" he yelled at their cringing forms on the ground.

"You, Sir, are a thief," affirmed Nicholas. "And a man who would betray his own daughters. How despicable."

"And who do you think you are, Mr. Holier-than-Thou?" Peter moved to stand eye-to-eye with the helplessly suspended Nicholas, holding his torch high in the air. "You're an interfering old gypsy who gets his jollies from molesting ugly girls like my daughter. That's who!" Peter slowly backed away a few steps and lowered his voice to a vicious whisper, "So, pedlar-man, you really want to die, do you? Well, let me give you a head-start to Heaven right now. Here." Deliberately, Peter dipped his torch and ignited one of the lower boughs of Nicholas' pine tree cross. "I'll make you a martyr-without-a-cause, if that's what you want to be." The flames moved quickly up through the dry needles, as Peter aimed his torch again, lighting another branch.

"No! No!" cried his daughters. Before he could do any more harm, Moustasha and her sisters knocked their father's torch to the ground and pushed him aside. But by this time the fire had firmly taken hold, and the tree was already engulfed in flames. So the girls could only watch helplessly as Nicholas, his face contorted in pain and horror, seemed inevitably doomed to meet his fiery fate.

But the sage Feng Shui engineer had meticulously chosen a setting where the tides of chi circulated to his best advantage. Thus, despite the gravity of his situation, the ubiquitous forces still had sufficient potency to enable him to overcome his adversity and even save his life. For as he hung seemingly forsaken in the middle of the flames, Nicholas involuntarily began to do what any person petrified with fear would do under the circumstances. Especially anyone who had spent the whole day drinking water. He began to urinate. Long and hard. The pee sprayed up the legs of his pajamas and then trickled down his chest and arms, until he was thoroughly soaked from toe to head. Any flames spreading in his direction were quickly extinguished with a pungent, steamy hiss. But eventually the ropes holding him, which remained dry at the back, were burnt away. And so as his bonds were broken, he gradually descended to the ground in a soggy heap, tumbling at last into his open grave under the charred remnants of his crucifixion tree.

While Moustasha, Elvira and Elfreda knelt to revive Nicholas and pull him out of his hole, Peter kicked a shower of sand over the saturated pedlar with his boot. "Coward," he snarled, "I knew you didn't have the guts to kill yourself properly. Not even with my help." When the girls were assured that Nicholas had no fatal injuries, Elvira and Elfreda quickly hitched Cupid to the pedlar's cart, while Moustasha brought a blanket and helped him climb aboard with her. As Peter realized what was happening, he ran after the escaping wagon. "Stop! Thief!" he called. "Nicholas, you gave that cart to me! I want it back, you Nubian giver!" When the exhausted Nicholas expressed no reaction to his nemesis' accusations, Peter continued to holler after him. "You don't deserve to be a real god," he screamed. "You never did! And you never will, now you've botched your crucifixion! Do you want to know the truth, Nicholas? You just had cross envy! You hear me? I said cross envy!"

As the cart rolled away, vanishing into the blackness of the night, Peter followed behind, ranting and roaring, "Cross envy! Cross envy! Cross envy!..."

Late that Night

"Whoa, Cupid, old pal." At the edge of town, when they were finally out of earshot of Peter's insults, Nicholas brought the cart to a halt.

"Why are we stopping here?" asked Moustasha. "I'm going with you."

"No, my dear," said Nicholas. "You were right about last night. It was our special interlude together." He took Moustasha's hand in his own. "My sweetheart, you deserve more than I can ever offer. All the best things in life. Like a young man who will bring you a fine family. I don't want you to lose that chance."

"But I can't go back..." said Moustasha. "And I might never..."

"Those still aren't the right reasons for coming with me," said Nicholas. "And so you must stay behind, at least for now." He gave her hand a squeeze. "But I'll make you a promise, that every year I'll return to make certain that you and your sisters are safe and well. You may not always see me, but rest assured - I'll be there."

"I believe in you, Mr. Nicholas," said Moustasha, squeezing back. "And I know you have very noble ideals.... So I think I should tell you... but I hope it won't disappoint you too much... well... my father wrote The Gospel According to St. Matthew. In fact, he wrote all the Jesus stories in his "Rare Book" section."

"No wonder he thought I was such a fool," said Nicholas. "But if he can't justify a cause for me to die for any more, at least he's provided a reason for me to live." Nicholas sat up straight, as his enthusiasm began to grow. "Moustasha, I want to start a tradition where parents cherish their children, instead of treating them like animals the way your father does, to be auctioned to the highest bidder. And once a year, perhaps on the Nativity Day of Jesus, they should be persuaded to give their sons and daughters presents to show their love. Candy and toys. Doesn't that sound like a good plan? Ho Ho Ho! If we could spread this idea far and wide, the world would be a better place for everyone. What do you think, my dear?"

"You'll always be my inspiration Mr. Nicholas," Moustasha replied. "And if I ever have children, I'll love them with all my heart. And I'll gladly give them gifts. But when they find treats in their stockings, I think I'll tell them they came from you."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Nicholas. "Then it's settled. Moustasha, I want you to return home and have a wonderful life, in spite of your father. But let's never forget one another, or our promise to change the world with our new tradition." After a long final embrace, Moustasha reluctantly descended from Nicholas' wagon.

"And by the way," Nicholas added, before riding off, "Don't tell Peter, but his Ab-Dominatrix is actually a chastity belt. That gladiator's widow couldn't wait to turn thumbs down on it - and her ignoramus husband as well! Ho Ho Ho!"

The last thing Moustasha heard Nicholas say was his command, "On Cupid." With a yearning sadness, but also a new sense of hope in her heart, her eyes followed the pedlar's cart until it was engulfed in the darkness on the road leading north.

One Morning Next February

'He loves me," said Elvira, tearing off a flower petal.

"He loves me not," said Elfreda, removing another petal.

"It's your turn, Moustasha! It's your turn, Moustasha!" chorused the twins, waving the disfigured flower at their sister. The girls had come to the meadow with some of their friends to gather spring bouquets to decorate their homes, for it was a festive season of the year. Throughout the Roman Empire the annual celebration of the Feast of the Prowling Wolf was taking place. In Turkey, it was a happy week of circuses, fairs, and horse races. And this was also the traditional occasion when bachelors selected their brides.

"I know who'll pick me already!" Moustasha heard one girl brag.

"There are all sorts of men who want me!" flaunted another.

"Who's going to choose you, Moustasha?" The question was delivered with an air of cruel innocence.

Since saying good-bye to Nicholas several months before, Moustasha's bleak marital prospects had shown no signs of improvement. And her father hadn't mentioned her dowry again. Behind her back she could hear her girlfriends tittering over her misfortune, and she wished she'd stayed home.

Suddenly, in the morning mist at the far side of the field, Moustasha saw a deer emerge from some trees, followed by a hunter with a bow slung over his shoulder. However, it didn't look like the man was stalking the deer. He seemed more interested in the flowers around him. Moustasha thought she saw him pick a flower, raise it to his nose, and then slip it through a fold in his tunic. A moment later, before she could call Elvira and Elfreda to look, the hunter and the deer had both disappeared.

"He loves you! He loves you!" Panting with excitement at their outdoor frolic, Elvira and Elfreda ran breathless circles around Moustasha, casting their prophetic petals into the wind.

Early That Afternoon

"Keep an eye on things till I get back," Peter ordered Moustasha as he prepared to leave. "I'm off to the races."

To take her mind away from the humiliating cat-calls of the morning, Moustasha busied herself decorating the shop window for the Prowling Wolf Festival. As she was placing some fresh wildflowers in a Grecian urn, a customer entered sporting a poppy mounted over his heart. Instantly she recognized him as the hunter she'd seen earlier. He was a tall lad without a beard, perhaps still in his teens, with blond hair that flowed down over his shoulders in fine curls. His eyes were the blue of lapis lazuli, and for a moment Moustasha was captivated by their penetrating stare.

"May... may I help you?" she asked.

"I hope you can," he answered with an impish grin.

"Yes?" said Moustasha, her heart pounding for no reason.

"I want to pawn my bow," the stranger replied.

"But you're a hunter..." Moustasha frowned.

"Not really," he answered. "I only look like a hunter. I couldn't kill a fly. I'm even a vegetarian."

"A vegetarian?" asked Moustasha, unfamiliar with the term.

"I don't eat meat," said the man. "I believe a fruit and vegetable diet can be healthier."

"You certainly look... healthy to me. Except..." Moustasha paused, "A hunter who doesn't eat meat?"

"But I'm not a hunter," insisted the vegetarian stranger. "My mother and father wanted me to... find my way in the world. They... equipped me like a hunter... and made me go far from home. But... now I have no money... And I'm hungry. Will you let me pawn my bow... fair lady?" The hunter who wasn't a hunter seemed to be choosing his words carefully.

Moustasha, who had never been called "fair" or a "lady" in her life was taken aback at the compliments. She assumed the man had only used the terms as a matter of business courtesy. But her heart melted just the same. "Yes, of course," she replied. "The arrows as well?"

"And the quiver too," responded the youth.

While Moustasha was preparing the pawn ticket, she felt compelled to tell the stranger everything. "This morning, my sisters and I were picking flowers," she began. "I saw you in the meadow. With a deer."

"I have a pet deer named Cupid," answered the lad. "An old pedlar loaned him to me... to guide me on my journey. He told me that Cupid... would lead me to the love of my life."

Moustasha's pounding heart began to race, as she realized the newcomer's arrival was instigated by Nicholas. "But how will you be sure you've found your true romance?" she blushed.

"The pedlar told me I'd know it in my heart." The stranger stared deep into Moustasha's eyes.

"What's your name?" asked Moustasha.

"Valentine," responded the youth.

"My name's Moustasha."

"I know," said Valentine. "The pedlar told me all about you."

"Mr. Nicholas," said Moustasha. "A wonderful man. I knew he wouldn't forget. Is he well?"

Valentine nodded. "Let me help you with your flower arrangement." Together they filled several ornate vases with colourful blooms. After they were done he chose a red poppy to match his own, and wove it into Moustasha's hair. "Thank you, fair lady," he said. "When can we get together again?"

"Tonight?" answered Moustasha. "In the meadow?"

"Till tonight, then." Valentine bent and kissed her softly on the forehead. A moment later he was gone.

Later that Afternoon

"Just one thin copper mite? Such a small sum, Peter!" Bazzar held up the tiny coin. "Your wagers have dwindled off to almost nothing, my friend. I can hardly afford to put meat on my table."

"May you only be able to buy rancid meat that will kill you," replied Peter. "Will you take the bet or not?" Although he hadn't been self-disciplined enough to abandon his gambling ways altogether, Peter had managed to cut down on the excesses to keep his hoard of silver coins intact.

Bazzar let the money slip through his greasy fingers and fall into his purse. Then he jotted an off-hand notation on his slate. "You must be saving for your daughters' dowries after all," he jeered. "And how excited Moustasha must be that the Feast of the Prowling Wolf is upon us. This year is undoubtedly her last possible chance for matrimony."

"I forbid you from speculating about my family's affairs, which are none of your concern!" barked Peter. "My relationship with you is strictly business. Nothing more."

"Then you should know that I've entered Blitzen in the Lone Wolf Stakes tomorrow afternoon," said Bazzar. "It will be his first outing. But if he shows well in a race of that stature, I'll have buyers galore eagerly bidding for him. The price can only go up, I'm afraid." The bookie rubbed his stubby hands together in anticipation.

Despondently Peter left the bookmaker to view the race on which he'd just bet. The realization that he'd never own the racehorse of his dreams was slowly sinking in. As he watched the mount he'd picked pull up lame, making him a loser yet again, his disappointment with his lot in life switched to anger. Silently Peter brooded and fumed at how his daughters were preventing him from attaining his deepest desires. He cursed Moustasha's ugliness and the ancient Turkish law that decreed that younger daughters couldn't marry before their older sisters. And on the long walk home, over and over he damned his enemy Bazzar for his stubbornness and greed.

That Night

"Hello! Valentine? Hello!" By the light of her red candle, Moustasha had made her way across the meadow. As she called for the tall stranger, she was suddenly alarmed to see a huge wild beast moving toward her out of the darkness. Fearing for her life, she turned to flee until she heard Valentine's reassuring voice.

"Don't run, fair lady," he called. "Cupid won't harm you!"

"Cupid?" said Moustasha, "Is that you?" She caressed the big animal, who nuzzled her neck and gave her a friendly lick. "I've missed you so much."

"We've both been waiting for you," said Valentine. With Cupid watching approvingly, Valentine and Moustasha embraced in a flurry of torrid kisses, which raised the heat of their desire even higher. "I've never been with a... woman before," gasped Valentine.

"And I'm unpractised in the ways of satisfying men," confessed Moustasha. "But I've brought a book called the Kama Sutra. I think it could help us. It was a gift from Mr. Nicholas..." When their passions had been gratified, and they lay quietly in each other's arms, Moustasha asked, "Will you be my Valentine?"

"I already am, fair lady," he replied. "I've loved everything about you... from the moment we met. And I have to tell you one thing... don't change a hair for me... Not if you care for me, my dear." He gave her a kiss. "I think of you like... you're my favourite work of art... In fact, you're the only girl I've ever felt comfortable with... And I couldn't imagine my future without you... Will you marry me?"

"Oh Yes! Yes! Dear, sweet Valentine, I love you so much," said Moustasha without hesitation. "Let's get married in the morning. At the Ceremony of the Prowling Wolf." The two lovers immediately celebrated their engagement with a fervent embrace, which led to more consultation of the Kama Sutra. When their ardour had subsided, Moustasha gazed up at the stars, and asked, "So Valentine, what will you do, if you don't want to be a hunter?"

"I'm going to be a floritht," he replied.

What's a floritht?" Moustasha asked.

"A merchant with a flower shop," Valentine answered.

"One thing at time," said Moustasha. "First, wouldn't that be called a flor-isst?"

"Yeth," said Valentine. "But I can't pronounthe it. I have a lithp. I didn't want you to find out until you promised to marry me. Tho I've avoided thaying anything with an "eth" thound in it thinth the we met thith morning. I hope you'll thtill love me now, Mouthtasha."

Realizing she had just heard Valentine say her name for the first time, Moustasha felt her eyes watering with sentimental joy. "My sweet comic Valentine," she laughed through her tears. "You'll be precious to me for as long as I live." Holding his cheeks she kissed him on the lips. "But my second question is - Why would anyone need a florist? I mean... If people want flowers, they can just go outside and pick them. Can't they?"

"I want to design flower arrangements that are artistic creations," said Valentine, getting excited. "Think of beauty that people will buy for special occasions. Like feast days, weddings and funerals. What I have to offer is "Value-Added Services", he boasted. "Something more than folks would do just for themselves. That's what will make customers come to my florist shop."

"Valentine, you have such amazing ideas!" Moustasha gazed at her new fiancé, the reflection of the stars gleaming in her eyes. "What a wonderful gift Mr. Nicholas has sent me," she sighed. "Tonight, I must be the happiest girl in the world. And thank goodness our friend Cupid could bring the two of us together." She and Valentine gave the great deer one final hug. Then, his love-match mission accomplished, Cupid bounded away, tracking the flow of chi northward to reunite with Nicholas.

The Next Morning

"You want to marry a flower-boy from Vegetaria, who doesn't eat meat?" Peter was in the middle of his Ab-Dominatrix workout, and resented his daughter's intrusion. He was also suspicious that Moustasha might be seeking a dowry.

"That's close enough, Father," said Moustasha, gripping her fiancé's arm. "His name is Valentine."

"Flowers. No meat. He sounds like a sissy to me," grunted Peter. "Are you a sissy, Vagabond?"

"I've never even uttered the word," replied Valentine.

"So why do you want to marry my daughter?" Peter looked up from his exercises.

"I think she'll bear manly..." Valentine paused.

"Sons," interjected Moustasha.

"Right," Valentine followed through.

"Then let's hope your kids are all boys, and not girls like her," snorted Peter. "And don't expect a dowry, Vagabond. I'm just a poor honest pawnbroker, and can't afford those kind of luxuries. What you see is what you get."

"Actually, I'd like to offer you a token gift to thank you for your daughter," said Valentine, producing a money-bag from his sleeve.

Peter stopped his stomach-crunches, and greedily grabbed the sack. "Take her then," he said. "But don't ever try to bring her back." Opening the bag, Peter discovered only lumps of coal, which he furiously threw at the couple as they ran from the shop. As Valentine and Moustasha made their exit, laughing together through the shower of rocky confetti, the church bells in the town square began to ring. Hand in hand, with Elvira and Elfreda scattering flower petals in their path, they proudly joined the throng of newly engaged couples, summoned by the jubilant reverberating tones to assemble for their Prowling Wolf Wedding.

Later that Morning

Bazzar inspected each coin to make sure it wasn't counterfeit, and then recorded its number on his string of tally beads. "I'm telling you there are thirty silver pieces and they are all true currency," Peter snapped impatiently. But Bazzar refused to be rushed.

"Thirty pieces of silver! Thirty pieces of silver!" Elvira and Elfreda chimed in, as they watched their dowries change hands. The twins had been instructed to dress in their best tunics and to put feathers in their beanies for their appointment with "Mr. Bazzar".

"Thirty pieces of silver," Bazzar said at last.

"And the girls," added Peter. "Both of them. I've honoured my side of the contract."

"Yes, my friend, you have indeed," said Bazzar, ogling the twins. "The horse is yours."

Peter turned to his daughters. "From now on, you'll be staying with Mr. Bazzar," he declared. "Do as he says and he'll be kind to you."

"Yes Daddy! Yes Mr. Bazzar! Yes Daddy! Yes Mr. Bazzar!" the twins replied.

"I have to get ready for a race." Peter turned his back on his daughters and hastened toward the stables.

"May our bargain reward us both, my friend!" Bazzar called after Peter as he ran.

That Afternoon

The field of horses entered in this year's Lone Wolf Stakes was rumoured to be the most impressive ever assembled in the long and prestigious history of the event. There was Dasher, the golden stallion, renowned for his speed. And Dancer, a chestnut steed with great endurance. Prancer, the piebald, always seemed able to overcome the odds. And Vixen, the roan, had the agility to manoeuvre through the pack. Comet, a pure white beauty was renowned for his burst of energy in the final stretch. While Donner, the dappled grey mare was a powerful contender who never gave up. And finally, her untried brother, the mighty black Blitzen, standing taller than all the rest, was certain to be a popular crowd-pleaser.

Peter cantered smartly around the warm-up area, his heart swelling with pride over the achievement of his lifelong dream. Mounted astride Blitzen, he already felt like a winner. But he knew he had his task cut out for him. Surveying the other horses, he formulated his strategy for the race. Given Blitzen's size, Peter resolved to use it to his advantage wherever possible, as an intimidation tactic. At last the horn was sounded to summon the contenders to their positions. A few minutes later the horses were assembled at the starting line, and the Lone Wolf Stakes was on.

For the first half of the race, the horses ran in a tight pack. Dasher had taken a slight lead, but all the others were following right behind. Peter found himself in the middle of the group, running stride for stride with Blitzen's sister, Donner. But he noticed the mare's jockey was too fat and was slowing the dappled grey down. Peter blessed his Ab-Dominatrix as he

surged ahead, and passed Prancer and Vixen at the turn. With a quarter mile to go, he decided it was time to call on Blitzen's power. With a touch from his whip, the stallion started his charge. First Dancer, and then Dasher were left in the dust as Blitzen captured the lead. With the finish line in sight, Peter was ecstatic. Then from nowhere, Comet appeared at his side, making his famous homestretch drive. The white horse was gaining more ground by the second, until he and the black horse were galloping neck and neck. Peter tried to jostle him out of the way using Blitzen's bulk, but to no avail. And from the extra effort required for the attack, Peter could feel Blitzen slowly start to fade. Desperate to win on any terms, he lashed out with his whip at Comet's head, hoping to jar the white horse off its stride. Startled by the stinging assault, Comet veered sharply into Blitzen's path, blocking his progress. Suddenly, as Comet bolted ahead, the highly strung Blitzen reared up throwing Peter to the ground. Immediately Dasher crashed into Blitzen from behind, causing him to tumble onto Peter. Then wave upon wave of stampeding horseflesh unrelentingly trampled the fallen horse and jockey, crushing them both into the dirt.

After the race, when the town barber had made a thorough examination of Peter's knees, he proclaimed that the pawnbroker would never walk again. Two of Blitzen's legs were also badly broken. Displaying his characteristic compassion, Bazzar kindly offered to buy back the ailing stallion for the price of one copper mite. In his incapacitated condition, Peter had no choice but to accept the deal.

That Night

Bazzar was feeling extremely pleased with himself. He had just celebrated the Feast of the Prowling Wolf with a hearty dinner of horsemeat stew. Now, his gluttony appeased, he was seated at his counting table, exulting by candlelight over the fortuitous return of his thirty pieces of silver. Again and again he rearranged the shiny piles of money, alternating from three tall columns of ten, to six stacks of five, and then back to three tens once more. The cool smoothness and soft clink of the coins aroused his excitement, as he contemplated the future delights his riches would bring. For tomorrow he planned to consummate the acquisition of Comet, to replace the ill-fated but fine-tasting Blitzen.

But finally, after a long day it was time for his greatest pleasure of all. With a yawn, a scratch and a noxious fart, Bazzar approached his bed, where Elvira and Elfreda already lay with their eyes closed, like two beanie-capped angels. Removing his rancid robe, stained with horse blood and dribblings of stew, he tucked his naked body in between the two young girls, revelling in their clover scent and enveloping warmth. Slowly Bazzar let his sweaty hands explore.

"Hello Mr. Bazzar! Hello Mr. Bazzar!" greeted the twins, suddenly wide awake. Reaching up to their hats, they each pulled out a pin which they plunged deep into the bookmaker's good eye. Shrieking with pain and terror, the now totally blind Bazzar was held to the bed by the zealous sisters, who took turns jabbing at his freshly mutilated eye until it was reduced to a hideous crater of oozing blood.

"Whores for a horse! Whores for a horse!" the girls giggled over their gruesome chore, while the screaming Bazzar writhed in agony with every merciless stab.

"Good night Mr. Bazzar! Good night Mr. Bazzar!" Leaving the pins carelessly sticking out of their macabre handiwork, Elvira and Elfreda scooped up Bazzar's thirty pieces of silver and skipped off into the street, never to be seen in town again.

Several Months Later

"Bazzar, you Ninny!" cried Peter. "I told you to move two steps to the left, not three steps to the right! Have you lost your wits as well as your eyesight?" Riding on Bazzar piggyback style, Peter beat the former bookmaker over the head with the scroll he was carrying, as he attempted to steer his bumbling blind porter through his pawnshop.

"Pardon my ignorance, my friend," said Bazzar, subtly shifting Peter's weight to increase the strain on the pawnbroker's mangled knees. Under Peter's direction they passed by the "White Elephant" corner, where The Ab-Dominatrix hung in a prominent position, and approached the "Rare Book" section. Peter placed his new scroll which was titled "The Life of Saint Valentine", beside "The Life of Saint Nicholas", which was already on the shelf.

"As a riding mount, you're a greater menace than that lunatic horse you tricked me into," complained Peter, turning Bazzar around. "A thousand curses on you both."

"And it's obvious your demon daughters came by their fiendish dispositions honestly," countered Bazzar through gritted teeth. "May you spend an eternity in the afterlife with only the two of them for company."

Peter and Bazzar both lived to a very old age. Over the years, through Bazzar's perseverance, Peter's pawnshop became famous throughout Turkey for its "Rare Book" section. Peter also gained a reputation as a highly regarded authority on early Christian manuscripts, until Bazzar exposed him as a fraud. However, by that time, Peter's apocryphal testaments had established a following of faithful believers. Thus his chronicles of legendary saints endured as Gospel truth.

One Morning Next December

Moustasha sat by the window of Valentine's florist shop, reading a letter.

The night before, which was the eve of Jesus' Nativity Day, she had hung a tiny baby's bootie by the fireplace, as she had promised Nicholas a year ago. The stocking belonged to her infant son, Nick, who was only a few weeks old. He was named after Nicholas of course, except Valentine had preferred "Nick", a name he could pronounce. Moustasha was just happy he was a strong, healthy child. And not a girl.

Moustasha had devotedly knitted a little bonnet, which she had placed in the stocking before going to bed, and Valentine had included a small rattle fashioned from a seed-pod. In the morning, the two parents were astonished to find two more stockings hanging beside Baby Nick's. In the first were some fresh exotic flowers, the likes of which Valentine had never seen. And the second contained the letter for Moustasha.

"Mr. Nicholas," was all Moustasha had said.

Moustasha's letter was from Elvira and Elfreda. It confirmed they were happy and well and living on the Isle of Lesbos, where they were becoming renowned for their nursing skills. Because of their successes with acupuncture, they were known to the locals as the Pin Twins. Valentine suggested that they should visit Moustasha's sisters some day for a vacation. Moustasha had readily agreed once Valentine had explained to her the concept of a vacation.

Moustasha and Valentine also lived to a very old age. And although they never actually met up with Nicholas again, they told their children and grandchildren all about him. And somehow, year after year, Nicholas always kept his promise, returning without fail for his annual secret visit, to bring gifts for the children in the dark of night.

Post Script

Whoever St. Valentine really was, his feast day in February coincided with the Roman festival of Lupercalia, which was a tribute to the wolves who raised the founding fathers of Rome, the brothers Romulus and Remus. As part of the Lupercalia festivities, boys and girls were paired up together, presumably like the twins Romulus and Remus, in a tradition which has been incorporated more or less into our celebration of Valentines Day.

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