

THE NAPOLEON COMPLEX

Prologue

Call me..... *Nicholas*. Ho Ho Ho! I'm that jolly chap you claim to understand so well. Also known as Mr. Nice Guy. Everybody's best friend. Someone who's been there all your life. The one you've always told your deepest secrets to. Old reliable *Nicholas*. Perfectly on schedule every year. Such a sure thing, you simply take me for granted. Right?

But how well do you really know me? Think about it for a minute. Please? Have you ever considered that I might want to be more than just a fat and happy Christmas clown in a red suit? I could have aspirations of my own, you know. Why shouldn't I try to lead a productive life during those three hundred and sixty-four days of the year, when you usually mention me as a joke? Oh, don't worry, I won't cross you off my list for being rude. I'm sure you don't mean any harm by it. But sometimes it's not easy being merry *Nicholas*. When I crave, above all else, for the world to take me seriously.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not complaining about my profession. I love my work. And I'm so lucky. Bringing pleasure to mankind is the best job there is. And seeing the delighted smiles on the faces of all those children is the finest reward I could ever receive. Those gap-tooth grins on Christmas morning have got to be my favourite sight in the whole world! But if I sometimes play up the Ho-Ho-Ho routine for the benefit of the kids, please recognize it for the show-biz shtick that it is, and don't mistake my fuddy-duddy act for the full scope of my character.

Because like everyone else, I'm more than just my resume. Although thanks to all of you who benefit from my gifts, I can't seem to shake my cartoon image. Sometimes it drives me crazy. Where is it ordained that I should remain a same-time-next-year demigod, banished to a frozen anti-Hell at the remotest edge of the planet? Can anyone say Ca-rib-be-an? I've brought more cheer to the world than all of my Olympic-calibre brothers and sisters combined. That should count for a lot. But despite my generosity, I've never gained the reverence they command. All my statues are made from hollow plastic. No marble for *Nicholas*. Because I'm still just considered a fly-by-night super-elf. Patron saint of toys.

I'm not asking for more power. I'm going to live forever, and I can fly. So I'm already omnipotent enough. I just want to be recognized as the genuine immortal I am, and venerated for the magic I already possess. Remember that I'm sufficiently all-knowing to be aware of your most fragile vulnerabilities. I've watched you when you're sleeping. I know your loftiest ambitions, as well as your darkest dreams. I've even seen you naked. And I always keep our secrets.

Because I believe everyone deserves dignity and respect. Now ain't that the truth! Ho Ho Ho!

Actually, you'd be amazed at my complete range of capabilities. They certainly stretch far beyond my annual midnight circumnavigation of the globe, through wind, snow, sleet, and reindeer flotsam. If you only knew...

But this is all too much Boo-Hoo. And not enough Ho-Ho. And it isn't even supposed to be my story. I just wanted to make the point, that when relationships are taken too much for granted, they grow stale. And my situation happens to be a classic illustration of the theme.

So let me get down to business, and present for you a tale of two men who have been friends since childhood. Both of them have worked very hard to achieve full and rewarding lives. They enjoy good health and have excellent careers which provide financial security. Their home-life situations are stable and supportive. Naturally they have all the material possessions they require, and they view the universe with a middle-aged, upper-middle-class outlook. In short, as hero characters in a story, these two guys are as boring as they come.

The problem, if they ever chose to regard it as such, is that they're quickly running out of reasons to remain friends. They've insulated their lives to the level where they no longer need to seek out each other's help or advice. Oddly enough, this unfortunate circumstance might be considered a reflection of their success.

The only common ground still left to them is the squash court, where they've been meeting for many years, although recently it has been on an increasingly infrequent basis. These lapses are generally attributed to conflicts in scheduling. Both their squash game and their friendship have gone downhill as a consequence. But they've never taken the time to give it any thought.

So here's a stale relationship if there ever was one. At least, in my taken-for-granted opinion. To protect the identities of the individuals involved, who may or may not exist, we'll call them.... *Spike* *and* *Sparky*. Ho Ho Ho!

Spike and Sparky's Christmas

"Let!" Spike stumbles a little and nudges Sparky in the ribs to justify the interference call.

Sparky doesn't argue the questionable decision, even though they were contesting match point in his favour. He just lets Spike re-serve. Spike often calls "let" when he can't get to the ball in time. That's because he plays to win at squash, by whatever means necessary. For Sparky, the game itself is enjoyment enough.

The volleying continues for several more services, with each man trying to gain the two point advantage required to win. Finally, Spike lobs a drop shot into the corner, hoping to catch Sparky off guard. But Sparky reaches the ball just before the second bounce, and drills it down the left hand wall at foul-line level. Spike manages to catch a piece of it with his backhand, but deflects it high off the side wall and out of bounds, giving Sparky the victory. This time, there's no mention of "let".

After the game the two buddies sit over a glass of grapefruit juice.

"Good workout, Pal," says Spike. "I'm glad we managed to squeeze this game in before Christmas. "But we gotta play more often. I'm getting outa shape. It's been about a month since the last time, hasn't it?"

"I think it was Labour Day weekend," replies Sparky.

"Wow, time flies." Spike shakes his head. "But I've been so busy. Especially at the office. They just named me salesman of the year at the Christmas party. Gave me a nice bonus too. Boy, I tell ya, I hustled my buns for it though. And when I wasn't working, I was trying to catch as many of my son's football games as I could. Biff was quarterback of his high school's junior team this season. First string. They went right to the finals. I was really proud of that."

"I thought of you the other day when I saw this bumper sticker," says Sparky. "Remember how we used to get a charge out of '*I Brake for Whales*' or '*My Other Car's a Mercedes*'? Well, this one said '*Visualize Whirled Peas*'."

Spike stares at him blankly.

"You know. Whirled, as in twirled. And peas, as in..... 'Eat your peas'. It's a take-off on those '*Visualize World Peace*' stickers. You must have seen them. Every rust-bucket in suburbia's got one. I thought it was hilarious."

"Are you still boinkin' that Chinese chick?" asks Spike.

"Actually, Ginger moved in with me this fall," Sparky's eyes light up. "She's such a refreshing change after Griselda. I help her with her English, and she tries to teach me Korean. She wants us to visit her family in Seoul some day. Gosh, I really admire her. She's so bright. She catches on to languages much faster than I do. Hey! We should have you and Trixie over for dinner some evening. Ginger's an excellent cook."

"They eat other things besides beef and chicken over there, don't they?" Spike sounds nervous.

"I've heard they eat pigs," replies Sparky.

"Anyway, there's a new steakhouse on King Street I want to try," says Spike. "Maybe we could take a chance on it, instead. That'd save you a lot of trouble. But look Bud, I've gotta be on my way. Trixie's arranged a Christmas Eve dinner for tonight, and she's given me a list of stuff to buy. But before we vamoose, I guess there's one last item on the agenda, huh?"

The two men grin and then reach into their tote bags. Each one pulls out a bottle of Napoleon brandy, which they present to one another. Both bottles are identical.

"It wouldn't be Christmas without old Napoleon!" says Spike.

"Yeh," says Sparky. "The three of us have been hanging around together for about twenty-five years, I guess."

Spike and Sparky's bottle-exchange ritual is a Christmas tradition that goes back to their teenage days. When they were about fifteen years old, they raided the bar in Spike's recreation room when his parents were out. Rum, vodka, gin, banana schnapps. They had tried each one. Timid tastes at first. Then double and triple shots. All mixed with cream soda. Their favourite had been Napoleon brandy, and they had dared each other to keep drinking until there was none left.

When they were eventually discovered, sprawled on the basement floor surrounded by empty bottles, their mothers had grimly nursed them through forty-eight hours of drunken stupor, wretched illness and a hangover from Hell. Then their fathers had furiously grounded them for a month, and made them apologize and pay for the liquor.

The next Christmas, Spike and Sparky, to their mutual surprise and glee, had given each other a bottle of Napoleon brandy. And the tradition had continued ever since.

Spike points to the green-black bottle in his hand. "You know, this little guy's become quite a Christmas Eve tradition around our house," he says. "Trixie invites her brother and his wife and my

sister's family over every year, and after dinner we all mellow out with old Napoleon. Trixie was going to put it on my list of things to bring home this afternoon, but I told her - don't worry. It's guaranteed by Sparky!"

"I like to save my bottle for those long, cold winter nights in January." Sparky contemplates the gold lettering on the label and smiles. "I take a sip just before bed-time, and it helps me get to sleep. This year I'm looking forward to sharing it with Ginger."

"Well, Bud, it's been a slice." Spike gets up to leave. "Call me in January. For sure. I wanna play at least once a week in the new year. And I'm making a resolution to kick your butt every time. Now you and Ginny have yourselves a happy Christmas."

"Sounds like a plan. Except for the butt-kicking part." Sparky and Spike shake hands. "And merry Christmas to you and Trixie and Biff." Then the two men depart on their separate ways.

While driving to his errands at the shopping mall, Spike pokes at the lumpy shape in the corner of his gym bag and smiles sheepishly. "One of these years I've gotta tell Sparky that I've been giving him back the same bottle he's given me, for as long as I can remember. But how do I admit it? I know he'd be pretty hurt. He thinks this goofy tradition's important, and I could see he loved my story about the Christmas Eve party. So what can I do? Maybe I should just ask him to switch to Glenfiddich

Returning home in his car, Sparky can't stop chuckling to himself. "Crazy old Spike. Thank goodness he never changes. He still cheats at squash, makes up bogus stories, and is totally lacking in a sense of humour. You have to love him. He's even afraid that Ginger would serve him dog meat if he came for dinner. But he *had* shown up today with the bottle. God bless him. And of course it was one of *the* bottles."

Years ago, when he had stopped drinking, Sparky had dusted off the bottle of brandy that had been sitting in his cupboard since the Christmas before, and given it back to Spike. He had felt a little guilty, but just for the Hell of it, he put a tiny dot on the label. Next year, to Sparky's delight, Spike returned the marked bottle to him, and ever since, Sparky had been tracking the same two bottles passing back and forth between them. Sparky had never asked Spike if *he* was aware of both sides of the double con game. That would have destroyed the ritual. And the tradition. And perhaps even their friendship. Besides, if confronted, Spike would have pretended to have known all along, whether he had figured out Sparky's duplicity or not. So Sparky had remained content to interpret Spike's continuing silence as evidence of his lack of enlightenment.

When Sparky arrives home, he returns the replacement bottle of brandy to its designated spot on the shelf. Then he shares his story about Spike with Ginger, and they laugh together, till the tears roll down their cheeks.

On Christmas morning, Sparky surprises Ginger with a puppy, which she names 'Spike'. Ginger later cooks Sparky a turkey dinner.

Meanwhile across town, Spike and Trixie eagerly climb the stairs to bring their son his Christmas stocking. When they poke their heads around Biff's bedroom door, they discover the star quarterback, lying naked and unconscious on the floor, still clutching *the* completely consumed bottle of Napoleon brandy.

Spike, who resolved long ago never to follow in his old man's footsteps, grounds the boy for *two* months.

And that's the end of 'Spike and Sparky's Christmas'.

Epilogue

Hey there everybody! *It's Nicholas!* Ho Ho Ho! World-famous toy god. Back again.

So now you've heard their story, don't you just love those guys? In-Your-Face Spike, and Behind-Your-Back Sparky. I was only kidding before, when I said they were boring. And even though their relationship is based on shams and scams at the moment, can you see why I don't want to let it slip away? They have too much invested in each other to let that happen.

But there's a lot of work to be done. I already got started on Christmas Eve, by having Spike's son initiate the beginning-of-the-end of that worn-out Napoleon brandy ritual. Poor Biff. It was a dirty job, but someone had to do it.

I'll let that incident cool down till the summer, and then I'll have Trixie organize a surprise fortieth birthday barbecue for Spike, where Sparky and Ginger will be invited. Trixie will instantly take Ginger under her wing, and they'll become best girlfriends. Ginger will bring one of her tasty Korean delicacies. Something with *noodles* in it. Spike will like it so well, he'll ask Trixie to check with whoever made it for the recipe. When he discovers that it was Ginger's concoction, Spike will at first be horrified at who's pet he may have eaten. The situation will be made worse, when he erroneously hears that it contains *poodles*. But when he's ultimately convinced that there were no canine body parts in the dish, he too will be swayed by Ginger's charms.

At the party, Spike's son Biff will give an account of his Christmas Eve brandy binge, and learn from Sparky for the first time, how the Napoleonic tradition began. Still smarting from his father's stiff sentence of confinement, and sensing an opportunity for revenge, Biff will boldly inform Sparky in his father's presence, that Spike has always saved the Napoleon bottle from one Christmas to the next. Sparky will briefly relish Spike's embarrassment and blustering outrage, and then gratefully follow up on Biff's opening, to admit that he's been doing exactly the same thing. Although he won't acknowledge marking the labels. To Biff's chagrin, and Spike's relief, the potential crisis will be averted. All concerned will have an uproarious laugh over the twenty-five year hoax. Spike and Sparky will slap their knees and pat each others' backs, and then agree that it's time to start new traditions.

Some things won't change a great deal. Spike and Sparky still won't have enough time for their squash game. And Spike will always bend the rules to win. But by next Christmas, Sparky and Ginger will treat Spike and Trixie to dinner at a Korean restaurant. Then Spike and Trixie will reciprocate the favour at one of Spike's steakhouse haunts.

Not long after, Spike will be best man at Sparky and Ginger's wedding, although he and Trixie will decline the newlyweds' invitation to accompany them on their Korean honeymoon.

A year or two later, when Biff reaches legal drinking age, Sparky will give him the other bottle of Napoleon brandy for his birthday. As well as first pick of Spike-the-dog's litter of puppies. Biff will call his new pet 'Brandy'.

There isn't much more to be said about Spike and Sparky, except - '*A friendship saved is a friendship earned.*' Which is a slogan fit for a bumper sticker.

Now I'll bet you had no idea that old *Nicholas* was so actively involved with year round happy endings! Even though I warned you I wasn't just your average fly-by-night, same-time-next-year super-elf!

But now you've glimpsed the full extent of my influence - and know that I desperately want to be accepted as a real God more than anything - don't just pray *to* me. Pray *for* me as well! Tell all those holier-than-thou, self-idolizing powers-that-be that I deserve to be proclaimed.... .Lord *Nicholas de Noel*. Fellow of the High Spirits. And God of Happy Endings!

And before I fly off to my next cloud-with-the-silver-lining-waiting-to-happen, I'll remind you one last time. Always remember who your true friends are. And never take them for granted. Serve them milk and cookies. Every day. And a glass of brandy now and then too.

Just follow this advice, and you'll always have yourself a merry Christmas. All year long. Glory Hallelujah! Amen. How's that for a happy ending? Brought to you by your grande finale generalissimo.... .Lord *Nicholas!* Ho Ho Ho!

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