



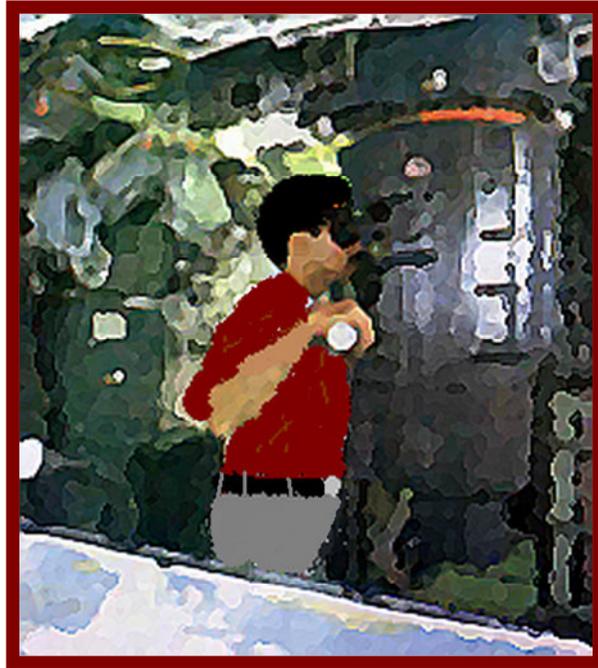
Secret Santa

**By Chuck Baker
and Paul Pruitt**

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SECRET SANTA

Nick was looking through the periscope of the submarine working on its computer display when there was a big jolt! He banged his head against the structure and was knocked unconscious. When he came to, he discovered to his horror that they were somewhere out at sea. He came up to the captain who was very surprised to see him.

“What are you doing here?” the captain asked.

“That’s what I want to know”, Nick said. “Why didn’t you let me get off the ship? I am not a sailor you know. This is awful, how am I going to make it home for Christmas?”.

The captain answered “Sorry we had an emergency and had to head out to sea immediately. If you want to get home early, we are headed up to the ice cap, and we can leave you there. You can make your way to the North Pole Research Station and they’ll fly you home”.

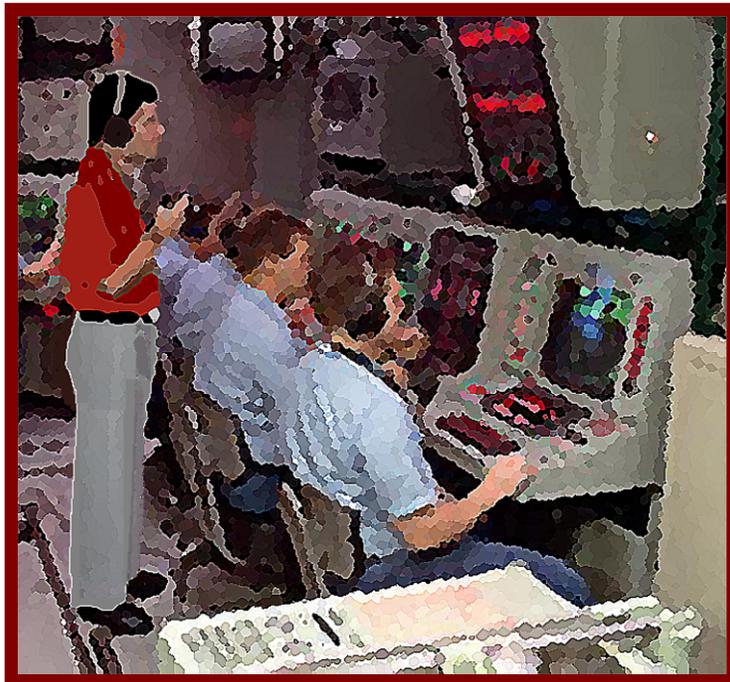
Nick’s wondered whether he was asleep and dreaming and his heart sank. It’s so important to be home for Christmas there was little chance of that now. His wife and two daughters would be waiting anxiously, and on Christmas morning, he’d likely be stuck at the North Pole, or underwater, in this submarine. Even worse his family didn’t know what was now going on. Sure the Navy would eventually figure it out and notify his wife but what a depressing Christmas this would be!

He trudged back toward the bunks where the enlisted men slept and where the captain told him would be a spare one. As he passed the sonar station, Ken, one of the technicians, saw his sad face and tried to cheer him up.

“Hey, Nick, you have to listen to this!” he said, handing Nick the headset he had on.

Nick put on the headphones. He heard whale songs and sounds. At first, all he could hear were the bass sounds alternating with high-pitched sounds. But then, something strange happened. Was he crazy, or could he actually understand what the whales were saying to each other?

“That sonar is hurting my ears,” one whale said.



Nick listening to the Whales

“Yeah, those humans are always interfering with our world. They are constantly polluting it, first with garbage, now with noise. Should we just ram this ship and be done with it?”

“No, we can’t do that.”

“Why not? It wouldn’t take much effort to squash this sub. . .”

Nick was horrified. If the whales turned on the slow-moving sub, it would all be over in an instant. He’d never have another Christmas with his wife and kids, ever again!

“I know,” the whale replied. “But we’ve been warned, remember? Cause one problem for humans, and they will create a thousand problems for you. Besides, do you see those krill floating by? Let’s go fishing!”

“OK. But I still think we should teach these humans a lesson or two. They just keep taking over more and more of nature. And they do an awful job of keeping it clean!”

Nick was shaking his head. Had he really heard all that, or had he imagined it? Maybe he had a concussion from hitting his head. He’d better lie down. He made his way towards the back of the sub. Along the way, he stopped to look out a porthole. A school of fish were swimming alongside the sub.

“Look at that ridiculous creature looking at us swimming by” one fish said.



Two Fish Swimming by and Making Comments

“Yeah. And so pathetic they have to build something to go underwater..”

“And to think, we are free as can be, and can even breathe underwater without some machine, without any device we have to have strapped on our backs, without any vehicle we need to be strapped into.”

“Silly humans. They’re just not as advanced as we are, I guess.”

“Of course not. They can’t even speak our language.”

Nick gave his head a shake. What was happening to him? First whale voices. Now, fish voices. He must be going crazy. Maybe he was too stressed

about the whole Christmas without family situation. He needed a few Tylenols and some sleep. Things would all look better when he woke up relaxed. Or so he hoped.

When he did wake up, it was to the feel of fur brushing his cheek. It was Sam, the ship's mascot, a tabby cat that was always as friendly as can be to him. It was nestled on his chest, purring. Only it wasn't really purring. Nick could understand what it was saying.

"I like you," the cat said. "You who pay attention to me, not like these tough, macho hero wannabees."

"Thank you for your kind words," Nick purred back, surprising himself and the cat, and making the other men on board raise their eyebrows.

"You, you can actually understand me?" Sam asked

"Sure," Nick replied. I'm sure this is all some crazy dream, but I'll play along with it.

He and the cat purred back and forth.

“Hey, Nick,” one of the other sailors piped in, “have you gone a bit batty? Did the cat ‘Get your tongue?’”

“Yeah,” another said. “You’re a regular Doctor Doolittle. Can you talk to my sick hamster when we get back, and ask him what the problem is?”

The men on board started to laugh at him and make joke after joke.

Nick purred one last message to the cat: “We’ll talk more later.”



The Sub’s Mascot Sam

Over the next few days, when no one else was paying attention, Nick had a few great conversations with the cat, learning all kinds of secrets.

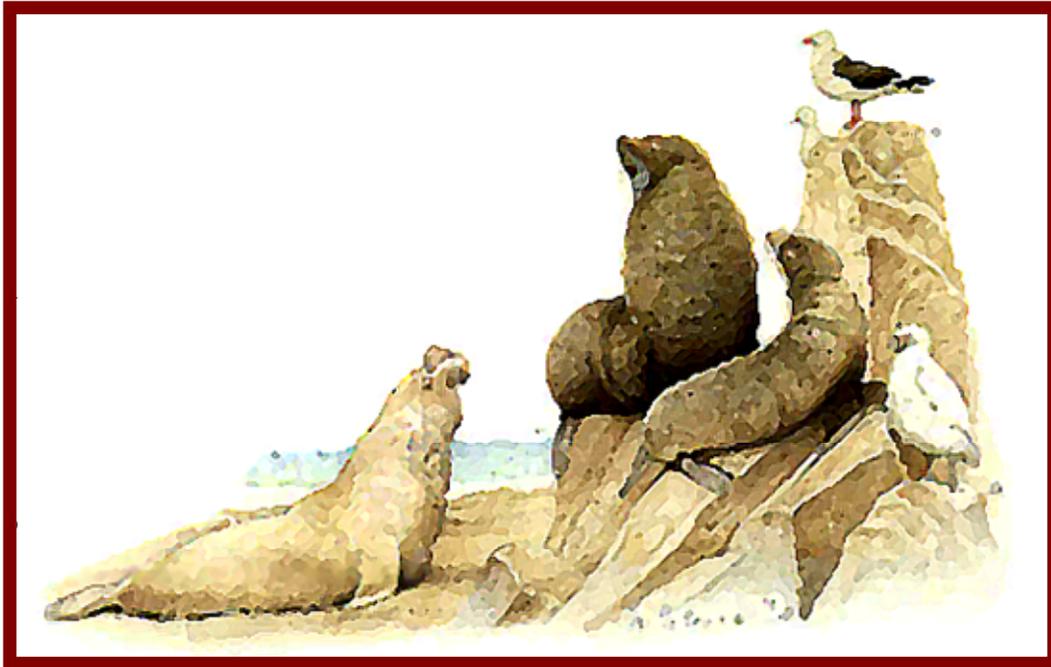
“It’s interesting what you see when people think you’re *just* a cat. They know you can’t say anything about what you see, so sometimes you get the best secrets. You get to see and hear what no one else can,” Sam said.

But the best secret Sam told Nick was about the others, the other humans out there who could also talk to animals, just like Nick . . .

The next morning, the sub surfaced, breaking through the ice shelf near the edge of the pole shore. This was Nick’s big moment. He had been given warm clothing, a tent, five days worth of food, and a GPS system to help him find the North Pole Research Station, a full 50 miles away. Nick watched the sub sink slowly underwater, and he sat down on a hard chunk of ice.

Christmas was only a few days away, and his family would be wondering where he was.

Just then, he spotted some seals, young ones at that. They were talking about ways to get free soda from the vending machines in the villages.



Seals Discussing Vending Machine “Vandalism”

“You know,” another of the seals said, “if we unplugged the machines, the cans would burst, break holes in the machines, and we could get the soda!”

“Not a good plan,” Nick said.

All the seals turned to look at him.

“You see, the machines are made of strong metal. If the cans explode they’ll make the inside of the machine all sticky, but the explosions won’t be strong enough to break open the devices to give you access. Also the owners of the machine might then take them away for good, Your plan won’t work.

However, if you really want soda, I'll be glad to buy one for each of you right now."

The seals stared in disbelief. He understood them. What's more, he had no white beard.

"Now, please, guys and gals if none of you want soda please tell me, is this the way to the North Pole?" Nick asked. "Am I going the right way?"

The seals just nodded their heads up and down, too shocked to speak.

Nick trudged off across the landscape with his tent and all his food in his backpack, to where the GPS indicated the North Pole was. He was sad, but the scenery was beautiful. It was a plush white carpet with a clear blue sky and no wind. He made good time, and when nightfall arrived, he pitched his tent and made himself cozy, and then pulled out his cell phone.

"Hello, darling? Yes. It's me, Nick."

"Where are you Nick? The kids are asking and even I don't know this time."

"Yeah. Kind of unexpected. We had to take a trip to the North Pole. Can you click the phone to speakerphone so I can talk to the girls, too?"

"Got it."

"Hi, Carle and Karen. Have you been good girls for Mommy?"

“Yes, Daddy,” they answered together.

“Well, Dad’s going to be away up North for awhile, and I probably won’t be home for Christmas, but I’ll be sure to bring lots of presents with me when I come back.”

“Daddy why? We are going to miss you big time!” Carle said.

“I love you. Bring some snow,” said little Karen.

“I’ll see what I can do. And Mommy, are you still there?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“I love you very much. I’ll see you as soon as possible.”

“Love you too, dear. I know that you’re an intelligent guy, but be careful up there, ok? Don’t take any unnecessary risks.”

“I won’t. And I’ll see everyone soon. Love you.”

“Love you!” all three said together.

The kids were sad that he wouldn’t be home for Christmas and this tugged on his heart. But he’d make it up to them. After this mission, he’d take a break and spend more time with family. He’d be a dad for awhile instead of a computer programmer.

He got an early start the next morning, packing up his gear and walking for a few hours before any winds would pick up. At last, he saw some strange buildings in the distance, the Research Station!

He picked up the pace, and hurried towards the building. Outside, he saw a UN flag and a marker that said, *This is the Magnetic North Pole*. On the door of the building was another sign: Sorry - We are closed for the holidays. Nick sat down on the steps, head resting in his hands. All he wanted to do right now was cry. He'd come all this way for nothing.

He heard a rustling noise. What? Was there someone here after all? He got up and started walking around to the back of the building.

Roar!

Ok, whatever made that noise was plenty big. Careful Nick, careful.

What he came across was not what he was expecting. He saw two polar bears growling at each other. But what were they upset about?

“That’s my bottle of peanut butter. I found it first!”



Polar Bears Fighting Over a Jar of Peanut Butter

“No, I found it first. You just took it from me. Give it back or I’ll smack you a good one with my paw!” Suddenly they saw Nick.

“Hey, he looks fairly tasty for dinner,” one of the bears said.

“No! Don’t you remember anything? Christopher does not want us eating humans! How many times has he had to tell you this? It brings nothing but trouble. They start bringing guns instead of cameras, and it’s always a big mess. Don’t even think about it!”

“Who is Chris?” Nick asked, nervously in his best Polar Bear language.

The bears seem confused. They started roaring and grunting in Polar Bear back:

“He doesn’t have a white beard. How come he speaks Polar Bear?”

“Maybe he’s Christopher’s brother.”

“No, all the men in Christopher’s family have white beards.”

“It doesn’t matter, anyway. Just give me the jar of peanut butter.”

“No, it’s mine...”

“*Give me* the jar!” Nick roared.

“Only if you promise I get it back,” said the bear.

Remembering that bears like shiny things, Nick handed them the GPS, saying, “You can keep this if I don’t give your jar back, OK?” With that, he walked over to the bear and made the exchange.

Suddenly, he started laughing. “You two arguing fools,” he said.

The bears looked at him strangely, and one asked, “Why are you laughing? What’s the matter?”

“The label on this peanut butter says *Expiration date: March, 1995*. This peanut butter is 8 ½ years old! It would make you very very sick if you ate it!”

“Really?” they both asked.

“Really,” he said. “Now tell me more about this Christopher guy, and what’s this about white beards?”

“Well,” the larger of the two bears started, “there’s a group of white-bearded people out here who can talk to the animals.”

“And Christopher’s their leader,” the other bear piped in. “We can take you to see him if you like.”

And just like that, Nick was off to a completely new exciting destination.

..

They had walked for miles. It was dark out now, but the moonlight reflected off the ice, giving everything a beautiful glow. Nick could have enjoyed it more, if he weren’t so cold and hungry. And...

“What’s that noise?” he asked, hearing what sounded like a stampede in the distance. A stampede at the North Pole? Impossible!



Herd of Reindeer

“That’s the herd,” one bear said. He walked slowly up the ridge and peeked over the top. “Yep, they’re all here, on time, just like always. Nick, come up here quietly.”

Nick scrambled up the ridge and peeked over.

“You see that flag?” the polar bear asked.

“Yes.”

“Turn it around three times in its base, and then bump it up and down five times.”

“You’re not coming with me?” Nick asked.

“No, we’ll scare the herd. And reindeer are off-limits to us. Christopher’s orders.”

“Thanks for all your help guys, uh, bears, hey, I didn’t even ask your names yet. What are you called?”

“I’m Nip and he’s Tuk. And by the way, thanks for saving us from some nasty peanut butter! And say ‘Hi’ to Chris for us!”

Those were their final words, as the two polar bears, Nip and Tuk, made their way back to the research camp.

Nick walked over to the flag, making a path through thousands of reindeer. A sign said, *This is the True North Pole, 90 Degrees Latitude*. Nick grabbed the flagpole, did as he was instructed, and instantly, a flap of ice popped up. The sign on the door of the flap read, *Access permitted to Elves and members of the Christopher Cringle Family*. He saw a steel door underneath the flap, and a phone next to it. He picked up and dialled zero.

“Santa’s workshop, may I help you?”

Was he dreaming? Was it real? “I don’t believe in Santa,” Nick finally answered.

“That’s up to you,” said the woman on the line, “but how can I help you this evening?”

Nick explained the situation, and the entire strange goings on.

“You can talk to and understand animals, but you still don’t believe in Santa Claus?”

“Um, well, I’m beginning to. Do you think you could let me in so I could warm up?”



Santa’s Warehouse Where All the Toys Made by Elves Are Stored

A man in a beard, and wearing what appeared to be long underwear unlocked the door and led Nick to a ladder. At the base of the ladder, Nick looked out through an ice window at a vast warehouse and factory the size of 200 Walmarts.

“Mr. Cringle heard your story, Nick. He wants to see you, but we have to hurry. Tonight’s our big night.”

Big night?, Nick thought. *And then he remembered, December 24th, Christmas eve!* The two of them get in an elevator. “You look like Santa Claus,” Nick said, cautiously.

“I’m not, but it’ll all be explained to you. Trust me.”

The elevator stopped, and the two men got out and began walking down a long, plush corridor lined with pictures of jolly looking men with white beards : Chris Cringle Claus, Christopher Cringle Claus, Junior, Christopher the third, and so on. The clothing of the men changed too, beginning with what appeared to be a Roman style of dress, and moving through Medieval to Renaissance to Victorian, until they reached the end of the hallway, and a big oak door with a brass nameplate: *Christopher Cringle Claus, the 25th!*

The long underwear man opened the door and showed Nick the scene inside. Little people scurrying here, there, and everywhere. Several other men in

white beards, who all looked almost identical to underwear man. And near the back wall, a large oak desk with a big man in a white beard.

Computer monitors lined the walls. They showed graphs, figures, shots of the warehouse and factory, and time zones from all over the world, 24 of them, to be exact, each listing how much longer it was until Christmas day.

Mr. Cringle was busy giving instructions over the speakerphone, and two short short men were helping him get on his long black boots, but he motioned for Nick to come in.

He clicked off the speakerphone, and began to speak rapidly:

“You have a fascinating story, Nick. My wife told me all about it. What you don’t know is that I haven’t heard of this happening to anyone since it happened to our founder, centuries ago. You are a very special person, Nick.”

“But I don’t get it. You mean you’re really, ”

“In Roman times,” Chris interrupted, “all the races of men travelled the world and intermarried. Cringle the 1st was a mix of so many kinds of people that his genes became similar to those of the first man on earth, who could talk to animals, so he could talk to animals too. This is just like when you mix breeds of dogs enough you eventually get back to the first kind of wild dog that existed before man started breeding them. After Roman times people didn’t mix

much again. Only in recent times have races begun to mix like they did in ancient days.”

“We’ve kept the animal talking talent genes strong in our family through careful marriage,” he explained, “so many of the men you’ll see around here look like me, and many of the women look like Mrs. Claus.”

“And what about the animals? Why were they important?” Nick asked.

“We’ve learned much from the animals, especially about kindness. Chris the First from what he learned, decided to show kindness to the children of the world. So he made one special day, Christmas, the greatest day of the year, a day when he would give as many presents as possible to the kids. This was already a special day because of Jesus’ birthday but he wanted to reinforce the spirit of the celebration and include the children in it. Over the years, the operations have grown, so he started sending out his cousins and brothers to distribute gifts too.”

“And what about the elves?” Nick asked. “Where do they come from?”

“Well, they’re tricky,” Santa explained. “The average person can’t see them, can’t detect them. Chris Cringle discovered he could speak all the languages of the world in addition to the languages of animals. One day he

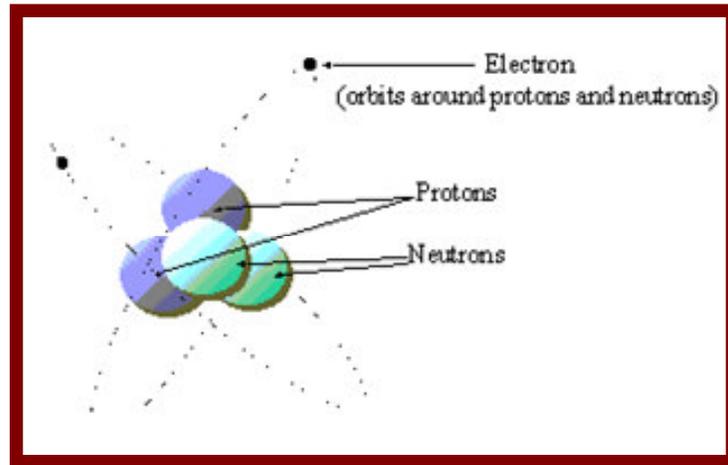
found himself speaking Elvish and presto the elves appeared. He could now see them and talk to them.

“You mean ‘I ain’t nothin’ but a hound dog,’ and all that?” Nick asked.

“No, I said *Elvish*, not *Elvis*! Anyway, when they saw he knew their language, and he was doing more good in the world than almost all humans, they decided to help him get toys ready for girls and boys all over the world.

“Ok, ok.” Nick added. “Even if I believe everything you’ve told me so far, and that is a lot to believe, I happen to know that reindeer can’t fly.”

“Well, for the most part, you’re right,” Santa admitted. “But deep in the Turkish mountains, where Chris the 1st was from, near an area thought to be the original Garden of Eden, a group of reindeer were jumping over rocks much taller than they were. He herded other reindeer to graze in that location, and tied weights around their ankles. They built up their legs so powerfully, that, come Christmas eve, they could fly, with the weights off, of course. It wasn’t until the age of science, that Chris the 20th discovered the Garden of Eden grass had a high helium content, which dissolved into the blood of the reindeer, allowing them to eventually fly, when they were trained right.”



Helium Responsible for Reindeer's Flying

“Wouldn't the sleigh that they pull just hang below them? How does it stay afloat?”

“Well, pretty early on Chris 1st invented a hollow sleigh filled with air that could be heated or cooled to provide buoyancy, just like a hot air balloon”.

“But we're not in Turkey right now,” Nick said.

“You're right. Everything about the sleigh and the reindeer is the same, but as for the grass, we grow it in special reserves in Canada, Alaska, Russia, Norway, Finland, and Sweden. Since the advent of cell phones, computers and satellites, we no longer have to use birds like Swifts and Carrier Pigeons to communicate and coordinate Christmas eve. It's made our lives much easier.”

Nick stared at the man. He had an explanation for everything, but there was only one true way to find out for himself. “If what you say is true,” Nick said, then you’ll be passing by my house too, right?”

“Correct.”

“Now, I’m stuck here and my wife and two kids are at home. I have no way to get there before Christmas comes, unless, ”

“Unless I give you a ride?”

“Could you?” Nick asked, sounding like a little kid.

“No problem.” With that, Chris pulled on the familiar red suit jacket and led Nick out to the elevator. When they got off at the main floor, the scene before them was unbelievable:

Rows and rows of sleighs had been packed to the brim. Red-suited men with white beards climbed into them, looking much like fighter pilots going to war. A super-size elevator pushed sleighs up to the ceiling, where doors opened up and seemed to swallow them.

Here, down below, one was set apart from the rest, and looked quite odd. It had a flattened egg shape, was black with a white stripe down the middle and was revolving. It reminded Nick of those machines attached to radar planes

that the U.S. Air Force uses to track objects in the sky. Obviously, this one belonged to Chris the 25th.

They climbed in, and were whooshed upwards. Nick noticed all the gadgets and controls inside the high-tech sleigh. When they reached the top, elves were waiting with nine reindeer, all tethered up. The lead reindeer had a glowing red nose, and it was then that Nick knew this was real. It was all true!

“Oh that?” Chris laughed. “That’s Rudolph’s great-grandson. Their family seems to *love* a special variety of the Turkish Helium Grass, which has fairly high alcohol content. Because they eat so much of it, they get red noses!”

Chris checks his screens, then snorts to Rudolph in reindeer talk: “Are we ready?”

Rudolph snorts back, “Dasher, Dancer, Prance, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Dinner, Blitzler, and I are all willing, able, and ready!”

“Then, let’s go!” Santa says, and they take off, with Rudolph in the lead.

Higher and higher they rise in the sky. The other sleighs below them do too, heading in all different directions.

“We’re heading for the equator,” Santa said. “It’s where I need to be to direct operations. . .but first, we’ll make a little stop in Maryland, U.S.A.”



Painting of Santa's Sleigh With the Radar Dish on the Back

That was where Nick lived. Though Santa was busy coordinating operations, he still had some time to talk to Nick.

“You know, Nick,” he said, “the skills you have now come with a huge responsibility. Have you thought how you might use them?”

“Not really. But I don't want to have to do anything like what *you're* doing right now,” he said.

“Don't worry,” Chris said. “My family has been doing this for a long time. It doesn't happen just overnight.”

Nick sat in silence, feeling uncomfortable.

After a while, Chris spoke again:

“You know, there is an important job you could do for me, something I’ve wanted to do for a long time, but never gotten around to.”

“What is it?” Nick asked.

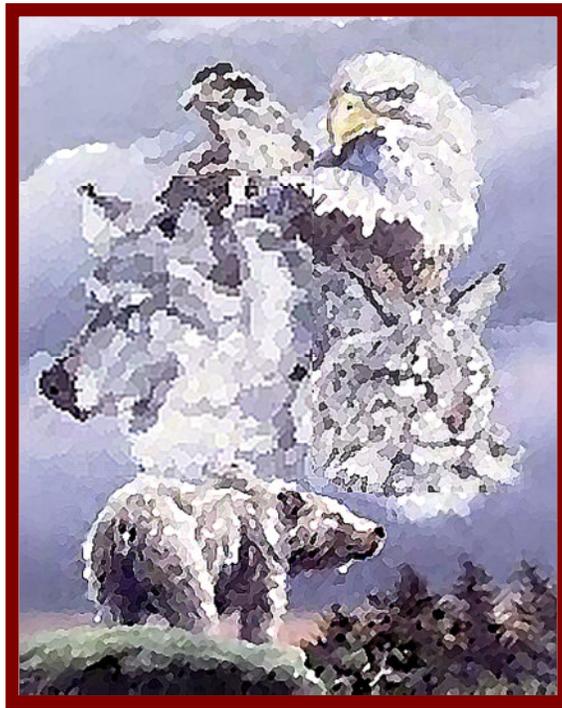
“Well, there’s a scientist by the name of Charles Darwin that I disagree with.”

“You mean the evolution guy?”

“The same. He wrote his theory of how life works and his ideas did a lot of good, but many animals are upset when I tell them about his theory. They say they’re not just selfish creatures who eat the weak and try to fill the earth with their own kind. They say they have respect for other species for the contributions they make, only eating each other when necessary, and never over-killing, something humans can’t say for themselves, I’m afraid.”

“I guess I agree with that. So you want me to do what, exactly?”

“Well, I think you could study animals and plants, go out and talk to all the animals and find out how things really work.”



What Would We Learn If We Could Talk to Animals?

Nick thought for a moment. “The problem with humans is that if they figure out how life works, they may use it in a bad way; like they’ve done with chemistry, and nuclear physics, for example.”

“That’s true,” Santa agreed, “but it’s a risk we may have to take.”

Nick was uncomfortable again. Clearly, this answer didn’t satisfy him.

“Well,” Santa added, “you can always find out how life really works, and keep it a secret. Only let those you trust know about it and use it for good.”

Just look at how our family has been able to keep the secret of Santa all these years.”

Nick still wasn't satisfied.

“Nick,” Santa said, “finding out the secret of life is important. Darwin's ideas have been used to do a lot of damage, so we know they can't be the truth. The truth will set us free, not enslave us. The truth makes me happy, I can tell you that much, but what makes me even happier is when I can let someone else whom I trust know the truth. Someone like you. Trust in what you know is the right thing to do.”

Nick relaxed now satisfied with the answer, and thought about what that meant for his future.

“20 minutes until our next stop, your house!” Santa announced.

Nick looked up at the stars and thought about his daughters and how they would look Christmas morning. He thought about how much his life had changed the past few days, and how much it would change in the future. But he felt a peace deep inside, a feeling that surprised him.

Santa looked over at him and smiled. As they landed on the roof of the house, he took out a small sack of presents for Nick and his wife and children.

Then he handed a special present to Nick and asked him to open it then and there.

Nick unlatched the box and saw a small silver cross on a chain.



Cross that Santa Gave to Nick

“We work to bring children happiness on Christmas,” Santa said. “But the reason for Christmas is the birth of Jesus, the one who makes all life possible. Follow His teachings and teach your family to do the same. If you do that, you’ll make the biggest contribution each one of us can ever make. You’ll be a regular saint, Nick.”

Saint Nick. Saint Nicholas. He liked the sound of that. And over time, Saint Nick's heart warmed to children all over, to the point where he sometimes help Santa Claus out on Christmas eve. He puts on a fake beard to look more like the others, which is why you never know, come Christmas Eve, are you being visited by, Santa Chris Cringle Claus, one of his many brothers or cousins or Saint Nick or one of his many descendents?

It doesn't really matter, as Santa said, the real secret of Christmas is Jesus. And what did Saint Nick find out? Jesus is also the secret of life . . . This holiday season, help him to spread the message.

The End