

Nick & Sadie is a Christmas fantasy of "what ifs."

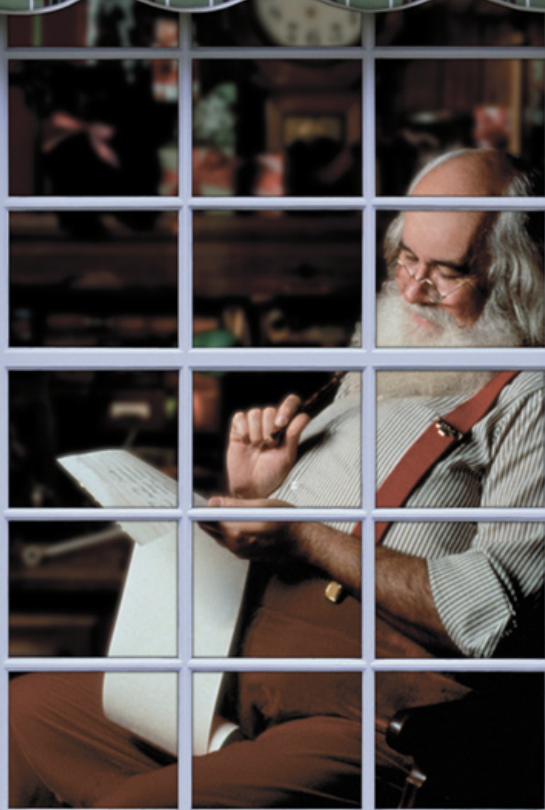
Nick & Sadie

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NICK & SADIE

Dennis Parker



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ISBN: 1-4392-4948-2

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

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“MR. KERSTMAN, you look just like Santa Claus. Are you Santa Claus? My sister says you’re not, but I think you are. If you’re Santa, then why do you teach school? You should be at the North Pole making toys. I already know what I want for Christmas. Can I give you my list?”

“Yes, Beverly, I’m Santa Claus. Would you like to see my driver’s license?”

Nick Kerstman showed Beverly and the entire class of second graders his fake driver’s license. He walked to her desk and handed it to her. He has shown it to hundreds of children, even some adults, since moving to North Carolina nearly three years ago. It shows him dressed in a Santa suit he bought at a costume store. The fake license grants him permission to: “Drive A Sleigh Of Reindeer Around The World On Christmas Eve.” Dugan, Nick’s friend, made it on his computer and had it laminated at a print shop.

“Look Denise, he really is Santa Claus. Just like I said.” Beverly proudly held the license up for her friend to see. “I told you he was Santa Claus. Now do you believe me? Mr. Kerstman — I mean Santa — which is your favorite reindeer? How

many elves live at the North Pole? Does it snow all the time? How do you get all the toys in your sleigh? I like Dasher best. Denise doesn't think reindeer can fly. Do reindeer ever get sick and can't fly on Christmas Eve? How tall are the elves? How many toys do you deliver? Are you tired when you get home? Do you deliver toys to the elf children, too?"

During the brief time he has been Beverly's teacher, Nick has observed that she is popular with her classmates, despite being so independent and outspoken. He wished more students were as eager to participate in class conversations as she has demonstrated. As she continued to speak, her dark blue eyes kept getting bigger and bigger and her face glowed from the excitement. Suddenly, he heard another voice.

"Mr. Kerstman," Jeff said as he waved his hand trying to get attention to speak. Nick glanced around to see who it was.

"Yes, Jeff, do you want to say something?" He looked at Jeff, who was sitting on the back row across the room from Beverly. It was obvious to Nick that he was anxious to talk.

Everyone turned to look at Jeff, who usually does not talk in class unless the teacher calls on him. "Beverly, Santa Claus is not real. I knew that when I was in the first grade. You must be the only kid at Victory School that still believes in Santa. Mr. Kerstman can't be Santa, because there ain't no Santa."

As Jeff was speaking, Nick glanced around the room to observe how the other students were reacting. Some were nodding

in agreement with Jeff; some were watching Beverly; everyone seemed to be interested in the conversation.

“Yes, he is,” blurted Beverly with emotion in her voice. “I just know he is ... aren’t you Mr. Kerstman?” she said with tears in her eyes. “You are Santa Claus; I know you are. Santa Claus is real and there he is,” she said as she sat tall in her seat and pointed to Nick.

This was not the first time Nick has had to answer a question like Beverly’s since becoming a substitute teacher at Victory Elementary School. But this was the first time a student had shown so much emotion. Usually they look at his driver’s license, accept the joke and the discussion ends. He has never had to offer any further explanation.

“Beverly ... Jeff ... class!” he exclaimed. “I know you’re enjoying this conversation, but it’s taking us away from our lessons. We need to stop talking about Santa Claus and start our reading lesson. You don’t want to disappoint Miss Price, do you?”

“But we want to talk about you and the elves and the reindeer and ... and ... and how will the toys get made if you’re not at the North Pole?”

“I’m sure Santa has everything under control,” Nick responded with as much kindness in his voice as he could, but he needed to end the discussion. “And I’m certain there will be toys for all the boys and girls on Christmas Eve. Now, please

class, open your reading books, and David, please begin reading at the top on page eighty-nine.”

“I hope Beverly doesn’t bring up Santa Claus again,” he thought, while everyone opened their reading books.

Beverly finally settled down and Nick got the students back on-track.

This was Nick’s ninth day in Betty Price’s class of 23 students. She was injured in a car accident the third day of school while driving home. It will be at least three months before she can return to class.

Nick began his teaching career at Victory when he and Sadie moved to North Carolina. Since he enjoys children so much, he decided to apply for a substitute teaching position at the neighborhood school that is less than a mile from his home. The principal hired Nick immediately because he had an unexpected vacancy and no one to fill it. That was the beginning of relationships that Nick treasures.

Everyone — students, parents, teachers and administrators — has come to respect and admire Nick the man and Nick the teacher. He is a natural teacher. His teaching style and techniques, while not always orthodox, hold the children’s attention, which allows him to engage them in the learning process.

Nick loves being a teacher, and students love being in his class. The Victory PTA has honored him as the Substitute Teacher of the Year for two straight years.



EVERYONE IS used to seeing Nick ride his bicycle around the neighborhood, with his dog, Jingles, running along beside him attached to a long, red leash. He and his wife, Sadie, are the most popular couple in the Westbrook Circle neighborhood.

Jingles, a black Labrador retriever, has been a member of the family for more than two years. He was a gift from one of Nick's friends.

Nick enjoys riding his bicycle and Jingles' companionship; it helps him relax from a busy schedule. As a large man, he realizes that he needs the exercise to keep from "getting any bigger."

As Nick rounded the curve, he heard his name called. "Hello Mr. Kerstman!" yelled a small redheaded girl standing beside a white car. He rode into the driveway and approached the car. "Hello Nancy and Mrs. Phillips. It's a beautiful evening. We're enjoying our ride, aren't we Jingles?" Jingles was looking at Nancy as he came to a stop.

"Mommy, can I pet Jingles?" asked Nancy.

"If Mr. Kerstman doesn't mind, you can."

Nick smiled. "Nancy, Jingles would love for you to pet him. See how he's wagging his tail waiting for your attention."

Nancy bent down and petted Jingles, who is a gentle dog. He

is the first dog Nick and Sadie have ever owned.

It is common for neighbors to wave or speak to Nick during his evening rides. When he stops to chat, he is never in a hurry; he always spends as much time as they seem to want to spend with him.

“Do you like the fifth grade, Nancy?” he asked. She was in the first class he taught at Victory. When she was sick that year, he brought lessons by her home and spent time with her every afternoon. He became good friends with her and her parents.

“It’s okay, I guess. The math is hard, though, especially adding and subtracting fractions and making them into percentages. I’m getting some extra help from Mrs. Long.”

“That’s good. Don’t let it frustrate you. Always ask your teacher — that’s why we’re there. And if you still don’t understand, I’ll be glad to help. All you have to do is ask me.”

“That’s very kind, Nick,” Nancy’s mother responded. “Nancy’s always said you were her favorite teacher. You helped her so much when she was in your class.”

Nick and Jingles make two trips around the road that encompasses their neighborhood. Their home on Westbrook Circle is halfway down on the east side of the oval-shaped road. The street is lined with brick homes surrounded by green lawns filled with dogwoods, pines and azaleas.

Tonight is one of those beautiful southern nights when Nick enjoys being outside. It’s the kind of weather he and Sadie had

never experienced before their move.

When Nick and Jingles return home, he parks his bicycle in the garage before going into the house. Regardless of the weather, Sadie always has a mug of hot chocolate and some of her homemade cookies waiting for him. After eating a snack and drinking fresh water, Jingles goes to lie down at his favorite spot in the family room.

Nick usually goes to his downstairs office where he reads any reports Dugan has ready for him and watches videos that were recorded that day.



“COME IN and have a seat. I heard your students have been asking if you’re Santa Claus. This happens every time you go into a new class — you must be getting tired of it. I know I would. Although I do know you get a big kick out of showing your driver’s license. Every time I think about that license I laugh. Do you mind if I look at it again?”

Nick took the license out of his pocket and handed it to Reid, who started laughing even before it was placed in his hands.

“This is so cheesy, I don’t understand why all the kids don’t get the joke,” said Reid with a broad smile on his face.

Reid Farmer was assigned to be principal of Victory Elementary School the same year Nick became a substitute teacher. They have become good friends since then. They play golf together and are both avid football fans. They try to attend one game each year. Reid is also a big fan of Sadie’s Christmas candy that Nick shares with the teachers and staff every year.

“Yes, that sweet but mischievous little Beverly asked me yesterday morning. And, no, I really don’t mind the children asking. I’ve been asked that question for a very long time. And I have to admit that I could be mistaken for Santa Claus. The truth is I don’t mind people asking me.”

Nick got comfortable in his chair, looked at Reid and said: “I dropped by to remind you that I’m available to teach through the end of October. That’s when we’ll be heading to our winter home. But I’ll be available after February first to complete the school year if you need me.”

Reid would do anything to keep Nick on his staff. At first, he didn’t understand him being away so long during the school year. However, after he learned of his excellent teaching skills and how well the students responded to him, Reid decided that he would do whatever he had to do to keep Nick. “You’re a good teacher, Nick, and the kids really like you. And, you’ve also earned the parents’ respect.”

Reid thought for a moment and continued: “You know, you could be the real Santa Claus. You disappear every year for three months around Christmas. Are you sure you’re not Santa?” He cocked his head to one side and grinned.

“Yes, Reid, I’m Santa Claus. Sadie is Mrs. Claus and Dugan is an elf. Want to see my driver’s license?”

They both laughed as Nick put the license into his pocket.

“I wish there was some way you could be available for the entire school year and teach full-time,” Reid added.

“Sadie and I like going to our winter home, and we’re not willing to give that up ... I’m sorry.”

“Well, I understand, I guess. Don’t forget to leave Sadie’s Christmas candy with Natalie before you leave. She’ll pass it out before our holiday break. It must take Sadie days to make all that candy.” Sadie’s candy is very popular with everyone. It doesn’t take long for new teachers and staff to learn about their special Christmas present.

“You don’t have to worry about Sadie’s candy,” replied Nick, “she won’t let me forget. My dear wife gets a lot of joy and satisfaction from sharing her candy with everyone at Victory. She does spend a lot of time working in the kitchen, but she enjoys it too much to pay much attention to the time.”



THERE IS no doubt about Nick looking like a picture-book Santa Claus.

He's a tall man with broad shoulders and a large chest. He isn't excessively overweight, but does have a large belly that jiggles when he laughs. His full beard and long hair are white with a sprinkle of salt and pepper gray — the top of his head is completely bald. His deep voice booms like a bass drum. He wears wire-rim glasses to read.

Nick carries himself with authority and dignity. Although his age is a mystery, he looks to be in his sixties. His brown eyes are warm but penetrating.

Store owners and managers approach him every Christmas to play Santa Claus, which he always declines. He also refuses offers to appear in television and newspaper ads

Children are drawn to Nick, and he loves being around them. That's why he decided to become a substitute teacher.

Wherever he goes, children come up to him to talk, or they wave and say hello when they see him. Hardly a day goes by when some child doesn't ask if he's Santa Claus. He always plays along and shows them his driver's license.

If a parent asks to have their child's picture taken with him, he always gracefully accepts. Most children leave believing they've met Santa Claus.



NICK, SADIE and Dugan live in a two-story brick house with white shutters. They have lived there for three years.

Instead of the traditional black, white or natural wood doors that adorn the other houses, the Kerstman's house has a red door with a large vertical oval shaped frosted glass insert. The insert is an etched winter scene. Two white columns support the porch.

In choosing a house, one of their primary objectives was to find a neighborhood that had lots of young families with children. That's because the main reason Nick wanted to move to North Carolina was to be able to spend more time with children, and to live where there were four distinct seasons.

Sadie loves to garden, which is something she has not been able to do before. Their front lawn is full of seasonal flower beds, red azaleas, boxwoods and white dogwoods. Towering towards the sky on the backside of the house are pine and water oak trees. She is proud of her flower beds and the colorful plants that landscape their home. She makes sure there are plants blooming almost year-round. Neighbors have become accustomed to seeing her work in the yard. They often stop to chat or to ask gardening questions or to just admire her plants.

Another reason they purchased that house was because it has a large backyard, where children know they are welcome

to play. In the open area between the house and trees, Nick and Dugan constructed swings and sliding boards, a jungle gym, a horseshoe pit and a basketball goal on a small concrete pad. Sports equipment and an assortment of games are stored in a shed near the picnic tables located in the back right corner.

Everyone thinks Dugan is Nick and Sadie's son, which is a natural assumption since he lives with them. He moved to North Carolina specifically to work with Nick. His features set him apart from other young men — a round, youthful looking face, medium gray round eyes, curly dark auburn hair, lots of freckles, a compact 4'9" frame and a bubbly personality. He is known for his quick stride and rapid speech pattern.

The neighborhood children call the Kerstman's backyard "the playground," which pleases Nick and Sadie. In the beginning, however, many of the children preferred to stay at their homes and play electronic games or watch television, instead of playing outdoors with each other. Nick was not discouraged. He accepted the challenge of finding ways to attract the neighborhood kids to his backyard and teach them how to have fun outdoors. Soon, the children were spending a lot of time at the playground.

Nick likes to play with the children as often as he can. He especially likes to challenge them to a game of horseshoes or checkers.

It did not take long for Nick and Sadie to make friends with

their neighbors and for the parents to trust them with their children.

Nick has a genuine interest in how his “playground buddies” are doing in school. They often ask for his help with their school work. He is always glad to help. The parents especially appreciate his assistance since the grades and behavior of most of the students have improved since Nick and Sadie moved into the neighborhood.

Nick and Sadie are very proud of the friendship and trust they have established with the children; it fits within part of their purpose for living there.



“HI NICK!” called his neighbor from across the street.

Nick turned as he got out of his car and saw his neighbor walking towards him. “Hi Larry. Would you like to join me for some hot chocolate and cookies?”

“Yes, that would be nice.”

“Well, come on in. I make a mean cup of hot chocolate, and Sadie makes the best cookies.”

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