

SANTA CLAUS #2 by ALEXANDER TSYPKIN

Translated by Paul Lazarus

Miracles tend to happen around Christmas. Everybody hopes for them, but not all miracles end on happily ever after. Somebody gets that miracle that they'd immediately like to return to the maker. That December, Paul was the chosen one.

Christmas Eve. Fear is in the air. The fear of not being able to find all the presents for your family and friends in time. But Paul wasn't nervous about it. He knew that he could deliver his gifts in January and no one was going to die. It's all about the thought and the care, not the date.

Paul was only 31, but the amount of stress he carried put him in reach of a genuine mid-life crisis. The summary of his life read like this: in addition to for some unknown reason, two University degrees, his work experience to date included a low-level shipping clerk, also a younger sister who was totally dependent on him financially, a wife who controlled both his wallet and his balls, parents who considered it their duty to show up everywhere he went, and, finally, his six-year-old daughter Veronica. Veronica was the hardest of all. It seemed to Paul that his daughter wasn't entirely sure what purpose he served in the apartment. Paul felt about as necessary as an appendix. All he wanted from Veronica was a sense that he was needed, a little daddy/daughter warmth and affection. Instead, he mostly got smiles for good behavior and even condescension. "Mom, we'd better buy dad three sets of gloves, you know he's going to lose two as soon as it gets cold," "Dad, why does Grandma not like the word 'clerk' and promises that I'm never going to be one, and always finishes with 'God forbid.'" Paul's mood, as I'm sure you can understand, did not improve with these comments. No, but of course, that didn't make him love Veronica any less.

And here it was the night before Christmas, December 24th. Dinner time. Quality family time, that is, food and four words spoken over two hours.

"Clean up the dishes."

"Okay, I've got it"

Then Marsha, his wife, went to the bedroom, but returned much too quickly.

"Where's Veronica's letter to Santa? We have to buy a present for her, and she said she gave it to you this morning when you took her to the park."

Paul, whose nickname in school was Slug because he couldn't remember anything, immediately got tense, but thankfully his memory was with him for a change.

"It's in my coat - in the inside pocket."

Paul was making himself comfortable with a tray of food so getting up from the sofa was decidedly a challenge. His wife went into the hallway, but suddenly her voice, sounding like a police siren, summoned Paul for an interrogation.

"Paulie, come here, now, you better have a good explanation."

The way "now" came across it looked like the tray dragged Paul into the hallway. Marsha stood with Paul's coat in one hand and an elegantly wrapped gift box in the other.

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"I have only one question for you, and it's not about your mistress Irene. I want to know where you got the money for this. Your salary isn't big enough, which means you committed some sort of crime, and I want to know what you did. But before anything else, where is Veronica's letter?"

Paul understood absolutely none of this. Zero. He had no clue who Irene was, where the box came from, what happened to Veronica's letter, or what to say to his wife. He had nothing but the truth, so he told the truth.

"Do you think I'm stupid? I found an expensive looking gift in your coat pocket together with a fancy card for Irene! Did you steal this? Did you hock something? And seriously, where is Veronica's letter? Or maybe you exchanged it for the box?"

Paul, like most slugs, could sometimes rattle off an amazingly fast reply to a seemingly insoluble problem.

"Right! I switched it!"

"Don't screw with me."

"Not I switched it, the coat! Give it to me! Look, this is Canali, it costs like a small car! It just looks like mine! I went to the art exhibit today by myself, there's a self-service coat check, well, I grabbed this one, probably, by mistake. So, there's no letter, but there is this box. Damn, how can I get it back now? There's probably an expensive piece of jewelry in the box, the real owner must be having a cow."

Marsha seemed almost disappointed. The scandal that had already happened in her head with the potential for a long running series did not get past the pitch before it was canceled. She understood that Paulie was right. He wasn't wearing Canali this morning or any morning for that matter. She carefully looked the coat over and realized that even the color was slightly different. Jealousy can still disable most brain functions, including observation.

"You're a total fool. How're we going to return it now?" Okay. Veronica's letter, we'll figure that out somehow, but the jewelry! This freaks me out. How can you live like this? What else was in the coat?"

"Nothing. There was nothing else."

Just at that moment, Veronica came out of her room.

"What are you guys shouting about?"

"Nothing, it's just that your Father is a total..."

"What did he lose this time?"

"He lost his mind."

"I thought you were going to say: my letter to Santa Claus."

"No, of course not! Santa Claus already has the letter, right, Paulie?"

Paulie felt the heat coming from Marsha's eyes.

"Yes, baby, of course, I sent your letter by special delivery to Santa."

Veronica studied her father carefully.

"You didn't open it?"

"Of course not! You taped it shut."

Veronica seemed to accept this answer.

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“Okay. Mom, can you help me? At school, they asked us to make a painting of Santa’s house at the North Pole.”

“Of course, honey. I’ll be right there.

Marsha, who had been using her most affectionate voice with Vero, extended Paulie's tribunal with a lower, more pointed tone.

“We’ll talk later.”

It wasn’t easy to get Vero to give even a hint about her wish.

“Veronica, we wanted to ask you ... we’re so curious about what you asked Santa for?”

“I can’t tell.”

In this regard, Veronica was very much like her mom.

“Why?”

“Because you can’t. In kindergarten, all the kids say that if anyone finds out what you wished for, then Santa won’t give it to you.

“You can tell Mommy.”

Marsha understood that the impenetrable fortress, most likely, would not give up, but left with no other choice she continued to press on in her gentlest voice. Veronica looked her mother in the eye and sputtered through her few remaining teeth:

“Mom, I can’t tell. Not anyone”

Veronica did not tell. Neither mom, nor dad, nor grandmother, nor Aunt Lena who was especially brought in for back up. NOBODY. Marsha, as stubborn and systematic as they come, approached the problem with all the dedication of a scientist, but her psychological “Trap” did not generate any results. Calling the museum was fruitless. Paulie’s coat was reported missing. The 24th of December rolled towards sunset.

The situation was desperate. Nobody knew what to give Veronica, and calling too much attention to the letter, already despised by everyone, only made things worse. Of course, Paulie was found guilty of everything. After examining every one of his mistakes made in recent years, all the relatives concluded that the only and biggest mistake Marsha had ever made was marrying Paulie.

They decided to solve the problem using Carl, the son of their next-door neighbors. He was three years older than Veronica and she both looked up to him and had a pretty serious crush. They explained everything to him, of course, saying that the letter was simply lost, you need to write a new one, Santa can receive last minute mail immediately, and the parents will explain everything in an accompanying note, but please, you can’t upset Veronica. Making Carl feel like he was one of the adults did the trick. He got on board one hundred percent. For his part, he was to do the following:

“You’ll go play with her in her room and say that if you share a secret with a very close friend (a child like you, for example) what you asked Santa Claus for, then the friend can write another letter, and Santa will have to listen.”

“Is that true?”

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Carl was only nine years old. At first, Marsha got angry, but then she remembered the age of her accomplice.

“Well, of course, it’s true! And, of course, you’ll write Santa!”

“Good.”

Girls will be girls. Half an hour later, Carl left Veronica’s room – information obtained.

“Puppy.”

He was so inspired by his own success that all he lacked was a cigarette in his mouth and a “walther” in his hand to complete the image of Bond ... James Bond.

Marsha fell on the sofa.

“Puppy? Dear God ... Did she say what kind?”

“No, Aunt Marsh.”

“Well, at least it’s not a llama. Paulie, you understand that we’re going to have a dog in the house because of you (I repeat: because of you!) You do understand who’s going to walk it and pick up its shit?”

Paul mumbled.

“Why’re you blaming me?”

“Well, who else?”

He didn’t argue.

The family was relieved, they hurriedly arranged a friend to play Santa and bought a small, cute dog. Everyone secretly hoped that the letter did not specify a breed, and, if all else failed, they decided to blame Santa’s nearsightedness and Veronica’s sloppy handwriting. After Carl’s visit, Veronica practically did not leave her room. The doorbell rang. Max, Paul’s colleague from work, stood in the doorway dressed in the appropriate red and white suit and an equally red face with a long, white beard. He played his role with jocular dignity. After the requisite Ho! Ho! Ho!, he started in:

“Does a girl named Veronica, who wrote me a lovely letter, live here?”

Delighted, Veronica ran out of her room and gasped:

“It’s me...”

“Well, Veronica, I read your letter, I liked it very much, and decided to bring your new friend a little early...”

Max played it up and stretched out every sound. He had dreamed of becoming an actor as a child.

The overly jovial Santa pulled out a living lump that he had tucked into his velvet jacket. Veronica instantly burst into tears.

“You’re all liars! I didn’t ask for a puppy!”

And ran away bawling.

The silence was so thick that all you could hear was Max’s horrified breath. Marsha pulled herself together.

“Did Carl lie to us, or what?”

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She steeled herself and went into Veronica's room. After about five minutes, she returned.

"It's really, really bad. Carl didn't make anything up, but Vero lied to Carl. She confessed to me that she had decided to check whether there really was a Santa Claus, or if we all had lied to her and lost her letter. Actually, Paulie, YOU lost the letter. And if you haven't lost it, then it means that Santa Claus does not exist."

Paul suddenly felt a major pain in his chest. Despair overwhelmed him.

"Paulie, I have always said that someday your sloppiness will go too far. You fix this any way you want. I give up."

Veronica didn't let her Dad come in. He stood outside her door. At first, he couldn't bring himself to confess. He wasn't sure what was worse – his daughter's disappointment in him or finding out that Santa Claus doesn't really exist. Once again, with nothing left, he chose the truth.

"Vero... it's me ... I..."

The doorbell interrupted him. He answered it.

In the doorway stood Santa Claus #2.

Paul looked at Max, sucking on a candy cane in the hallway, again at the new artist and sadly said:

"You must have the wrong address."

"Are you Veronica's Father?"

"Yes, but we did not ask for a Santa Claus."

"You didn't, but Veronica, did." Is she at home?

"I'm sorry, there's some kind of mistake."

Santa #2 lowered his voice into a whisper.

"It's not a mistake? I found the letter, and the coat is yours."

He took out the opened letter and pointed to the package

"It even had a return address."

Paul began to realize that this was not a mistake.

"You found my coat?"

"Shhh, quiet, yes, I found it, I hope you have mine too, there's an expensive thing in it.

"Yes, of course!"

"But let's take care of Veronica first."

Paul ran down the hallway.

"Veronica, the real Santa is here! That was ... the first, that ... just come out!

Veronica came out into the hallway. The new Santa had the same booming voice as the previous one.

"Veronica, I read your letter - twice. It's the best letter I received, and I read a lot, so I wanted to come to you myself. Here, as you wished, I brought a violin for your dad to play."

Santa returned to the doorway and produced the instrument in its ancient leather case.

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Marsha, Max and Paul froze. Veronica's eyes grew bigger and bigger as Santa continued in his cheery basso.

"Papa, Veronica wrote to me that she once heard you playing and that you are very sad because you don't have a violin at home. Apparently, the sound annoys your wife but Veronica wants you to be happy.

Santa Claus studied Marsha, who, for the first time in many years, was speechless.

"So now, Papa, play your favorite tune." You have my blessing. A merry Christmas to everybody! Ho! Ho! Ho!

Veronica rushed to Santa Claus and hugged him around the neck.

"Thank you, Santa! I believe in you! Dad, will you play for me, like that time, under the bridge? And play for me every day, I love you so much!

She grabbed the violin and handed it to Paul. Paul swallowed a lump in his throat. A couple of years ago, he was walking with Veronica from her after school activities and saw a young woman playing in the underpass. A conservatory student trying to earn her rent money. She let him borrow her secondhand violin and as he played the final portion of Bach's Partita in D minor, a whole noisy stream of passersby froze like the Hudson in Winter. Veronica looked at the frozen people and understood: her dad was a magician! A real one.

Paul had not played in a long time. It was impossible to earn a living as a musician, and at home the noise of the violin was prohibited. He gave his away to the grad student to keep the peace. That's how he explained it to Veronica.

He had not put it together until this very moment: children are just like adults, only kind.

An hour later, two drunken Santas and Vero's parents, alternating between tears and laughter, recounted the journey of the coat and marveled at the thoughtfulness of Divine Providence. The last toast was for the second Santa Claus, who, taking the box intended for Irene, went to deliver his expensive gift. She was his sister. Santa Claus was lonely, and after his encounter with Veronica and Paul was very much focused on his yet unborn, but long-awaited children.

At midnight, Paul picked up the violin and played for Veronica, who was sitting under the tree. And in her head, Marsha asked Santa Claus a question.

"Santa, what did I do wrong this year that all I'm going to get is a drawing from my daughter, a hat from my husband, and a puppy and violin from you?

Her New Year did not look like it was going to get off to a good start. Well, perhaps she should've been a little less naughty and a lot more nice.

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