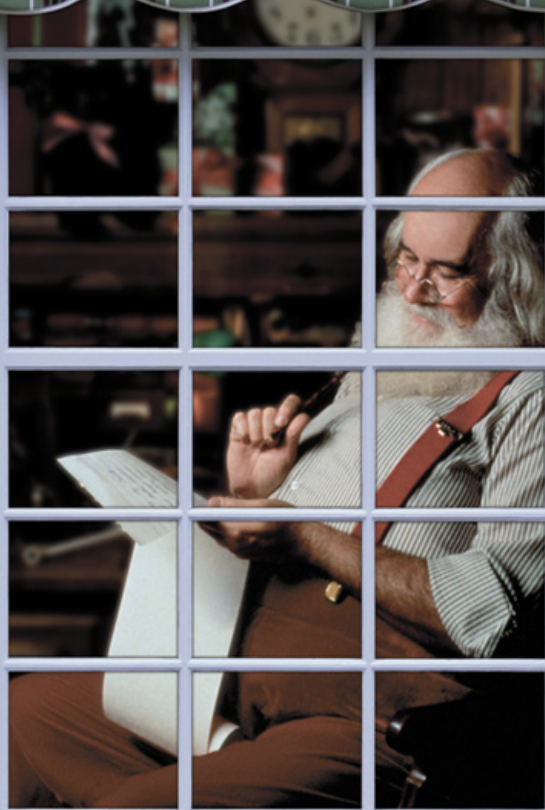


NICK & SADIE

Dennis Parker



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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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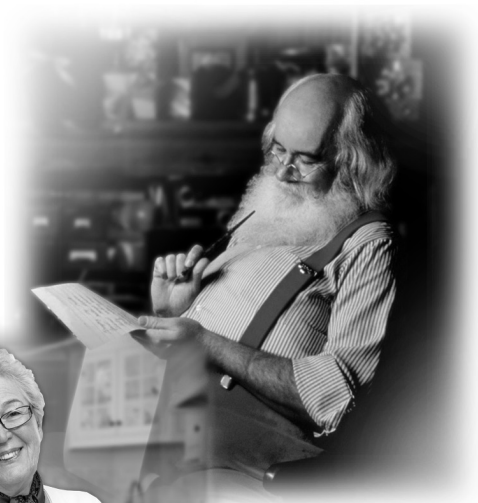
The author wishes to express his
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and Beverly Parker, wife;
for their assistance, suggestions and support.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my family,
who have loved, supported and encouraged me
in all my endeavors.

It is also dedicated to the memory
of my father and brother.

WELCOME TO THE
WORLD OF
NICK & SADIE





“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.”

Larry took a seat at the kitchen table. “I wanted to come over and thank you. In fact, Kim and I both want to thank you for working with Vivian on her math. In such a short time she seems to be more confident about her math class. We really appreciate what you’ve done for her. You’ve helped her get off to a good start.”

Nick handed Larry a cup of steaming hot chocolate. He then got the plate of cookies Sadie had left for him. “I was glad to help. Vivian is a very bright girl. I know you and Kim must be proud. Math is a difficult subject for some students.”

Larry sipped the hot chocolate and bit into the chocolate cookie that he noticed had a slight blueberry taste. “You’re right about Sadie’s cookies. This is good. I’ve never had chocolate-blueberry cookies before. It’s a good taste combination. There’s something else, but I can’t quite describe it. And your hot chocolate isn’t bad either,” Larry said with a chuckle.

“Sadie’s a good cook, especially cookies and candy,” answered Nick. “I don’t know how she dreams up such good recipes. Everyone always says there’s something special about her cookies.”

Larry continued, “I’m afraid my frustration level always rises when I’m not able to help Vivian with her fourth grade math. And Kim’s not any better. That’s why we suggested she talk to you. We’ve heard other parents say how much you’ve helped their children.”

Vivian asked for Nick's help nearly two weeks ago. She asked him while they were playing checkers. "I guess Vivian has told you about our games of checkers."

Larry chuckled and said they knew about the checkers.

"I think checkers is a good teaching tool," Nick said. "Some games are better than others at teaching children to follow rules and think logically. But I've always favored checkers. Vivian is becoming a good player. She beats me more times now than I would like to admit.

"I'm seeing a lot of improvement in her math work; she's starting to understand the concepts better. But we still have a little more work to do."

Larry finished his cookie and took another drink of hot chocolate, "How can Kim and I repay you for the time you've spent with our daughter? We're indebted to you for all the time you've spent with her."

Nick told Larry they didn't owe him anything, but Larry would not accept Nick's answer.

"Okay, how about this?" Nick jokingly said with a laugh. "You mow our yard all next summer and keep the leaves raked, and Kim can clean our house every week for a year."

Larry responded with a hearty laugh, "That sounds fair."

"I'm kidding ... seriously Larry, I don't want you and Kim to feel indebted. I'm a teacher, that's what I do. I enjoy teaching."

Larry got the message. As he was leaving he greeted Sadie, who was coming in the door carrying two bags of groceries. “I really like your chocolate-blueberry cookies,” he said. “Nick shared some with me. Would you mind giving Kim a copy of your recipe? I’d like to have more of those cookies.”



SADIE HEARD noise coming from the backyard. She instinctively knew it was some of the neighborhood children. It was a sound she enjoyed hearing. She walked to the sliding glass door that led to the screened porch and saw Karen and Seth playing horseshoes.

Seth heard the door open and turned and saw Sadie. “Mrs. Kerstman, is Mr. Kerstman at home?” he asked.

“Yes, he is.”

“Do you think he can play the winner? I’m going to beat the socks off Karen.”

“Oh, no you’re not,” replied Karen, who was handing the horseshoes to Seth.

“Well, just watch me,” he positioned himself to throw.

“I’ll ask him,” Sadie said as she turned and walked back into the house.

Until Nick and Dugan built the horseshoe pit, none of the neighborhood children had ever played horseshoes. Now it was one their favorite activities. Instead of iron horseshoes, which he knew would be too heavy and not very safe for the children, Nick bought a set of hard-rubber horseshoes.

Several times each summer the children have a horseshoe tournament. The winner gets to play Nick, who doesn’t make it easy for them win. Instead, he challenges them to play the best and smartest game they can, and win by being the best player.

“Okay, who am I going to beat today?” Nick asked as he stepped into the yard a few minutes after Sadie told him about Seth’s challenge.

“We’re tied,” responded Karen. “The winner of the next game will play you.”

Seth pitched his next two horseshoes outside the six-inch scoring mark. Karen’s first pitch was also outside.

“My next horseshoe is going to be a ringer, just watch,” exclaimed Karen. She carefully aimed and tossed the red horseshoe. “Look, I did it! That’s three more points for me. Now it’s nineteen to fourteen. Two more points and I win.”

“The game’s not over by a long-shot,” Seth said with determination in his voice. “I can still beat you. Just wait before you start celebrating.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Now, now, let’s remember this is just a game to be enjoyed,” Nick responded. “Let’s be good sports — win or lose.”

After two more turns, Karen beat Seth 21 to 17.

Seth doesn’t like to lose, especially to girls. “I’ll win next time, just you wait. I was rusty today; I haven’t played any since school started,” he said with as much confidence as he could muster.

“Now it’s my turn,” Nick said. He began to collect the horse-shoes.

“Instead of playing, can we just talk?” Karen asked. “Maybe we can play tomorrow. I just want to talk right now.”

“Of course, Karen, let’s sit on the screened porch where we’ll be more comfortable. Seth, would you like to join us?” Nick and Karen started walking toward the door.

Seth started walking toward the gate to leave the playground. “Naw, I’ve got homework. I’ll see ya’ll later.”

They settled in wicker chairs across from each other. “Mr. Kerstman, I want to be a school teacher, like you. I enjoy reading and studying, and I like school. My friends think I’m weird. My parents say I’m too young to be thinking about what I want to do when I grow up. What do you think?”

“I’m not going to say if you’re right or wrong. I will tell you this: I believe teaching is a calling; not everyone can be a teacher. Good teachers are born with certain qualities that make

them good teachers. It's part of who they are. Although, education is critically important, as well. A good teacher is an educated person, whose main objective is to motivate their students to want to learn."

Karen listened and then responded, "My dad says that if I like school so much that I should be making better grades."

"That's what I'm saying, Karen. Making good grades is important, but they'll not necessarily determine if you would be a good teacher or a bad teacher. There's more to it than that."

"You mean if I don't have certain things inside of me I can't be a teacher."

"That's one way to put it. What I'm saying is that you'll know if you're supposed to be a teacher. You're probably still too young to know that right now, but as you get older and experience more things, you'll find out if being a teacher is where you should devote your life. You've still got plenty of time. For right now, I think you should enjoy your youth and continue to do your very best in school."

Karen felt relieved. "Can I come over tomorrow and play that game of horseshoes you owe me?"

"Yes, most definitely. I'll be waiting for you."



THE SWEET Tooth Candy factory has been a local landmark with its decorated water tank for more than 17 years. It's very visible since it sits on a large knoll off a busy road. It's surrounded on three sides by a forest of loblolly pine trees with white dogwoods scattered throughout.

Most residents enjoy the sweet aroma that comes from the factory each morning when candy is being cooked.

The water tank has been decorated to look like a piece of yellow hard candy. Every Christmas, the tank is decorated with red and white lights. Two years ago an animated Santa's village, with life-size elves making candy and toys, was added to the front lawn.

Walter Thompson owns and operates the factory, which makes an assortment of candies for department stores, candy stores and specialty shops throughout the southeast. Southern Delight Hard Candy is the biggest seller.

For the past year and a half, Sadie has worked for the candy company. She got the job because of the Christmas candy Nick gives the Victory School teachers and staff. The husband of one of the teachers works for the candy company. He gave Mr.

Thompson a sample of Sadie's candy.

Sadie Kerstman has never met a stranger. Most people say she is the warmest and most likeable person they have ever met. She is often described as a "caring person," someone "who loves people," who is always "available to help" a friend or stranger, a person "without pretenses," and "a person of genuine character." Wherever Sadie goes, she makes friends and never forgets their names.

She looks shorter than she really is — only about four inches shorter than Nick. Her rosy cheeks and well-groomed salt and pepper hair — more salt than pepper — compliment her bright blue eyes and fair complexion. The first thing people notice is her sweet smile that is often described as "comforting" and "soothing."

SADIE WAS happy to receive Walter Thompson's invitation a year and a half ago to visit his factory. She was told that he had been given some of her candy. When they met that first time, it was like old friends getting together; their mutual love for making candy was the key.

Sadie thoroughly enjoyed the tour of the factory. Walter later said that he had never conducted a tour where "so many questions were asked and so much interest in candy making was expressed."

After the tour, they went to his rectangular-shaped office, which was not large or impressive. A long horizontal window was located along the wall on the right side. It looked into the main production area. Sadie was not surprised to see candy everywhere — in bowls and boxes; he even had candy from his competitors. The walls were decorated with photographs of candy and candy wrappers, and what appeared to be old scenes from the factory. Family photographs were neatly displayed on the wall behind his disorganized desk, which was located at the far end of the room, opposite the door.

Sadie's first impression was that Walter looked like an ideal candy maker — short and slightly plump, with a jolly personality and twinkling eyes. Walter was handsomely dressed in a well-tailored dark blue suit, starched white shirt with a red and white striped tie. She learned later that he is a well-respected businessman — three-term president of the local Chamber of Commerce, former member of the North Carolina Economic Development Council, and the new Vice President of North American Confectioners.

"I must say, Sadie, I really enjoyed your candy," Mr. Thompson remarked. "It's the most unusual candy I've ever tasted. I've been in the candy business for

more than thirty years, and I've never eaten anything like it. Everything about it is wonderful — the rich taste, the full texture and the color. It's an attractive candy, too. But the aftertaste, that alluring aftertaste is indescribable. That's something I've never tasted in a candy before. And the compelling aroma makes it even more desirable. Your candy is absolutely amazing. Is it your recipe?"

"Yes, I've had the recipe for a long time ... a very long time. But I can remember the first time I made it. I made it for our special friends. And I still make it for them every Christmas." She felt uncomfortable talking about herself and her candy. Her reason for meeting him was to tour his factory. She has enjoyed his candies since moving to North Carolina and wanted to meet a professional candy maker. She did not expect the conversation to be focused on her.

"Not only is your candy wonderful, Sadie, but I think you're a natural candy maker. From my experience, I can appreciate the skill it takes to make candy of this quality." It looked like he had something else to say. He hesitated for a moment, appeared to make a decision, and then proceeded. "You might think I'm impulsive, but I decided after sampling your candy, that when we met I was going to offer you a job. I could use someone

with your extraordinary talents working in our kitchen. I'm convinced you could help us improve and expand our product line. Maybe, you'll even consider sharing your recipe with me, for the right price, of course."

Sadie was very surprised. This is not what she was expecting from her visit.

Sadie has always been protective of her recipe. People are always asking for a copy, but she always declined. She enjoys making and giving candy to neighbors and friends, and the people at Nick's school, but she especially likes to make it for her special friends on December 26th at their winter home. It has become a Christmas tradition.

Mr. Thompson looked puzzled by her reaction. He expected her to be pleased with his offer. Instead, she looked concerned.



TWO WEEKS later, after giving the request a great deal of thought and prayer, and talking with Nick, Sadie decided she was ready to call Mr. Thompson and ask for a second appointment.

"I'll be pleased to work for you, Mr. Thompson," she said after the customary small talk. "However, I

can only work four hours a day. If that's agreeable? And, I'm willing to lease my recipe to you. The recipe must remain a secret. My husband and I are in the process of getting a contract prepared."

Since it took her so long to get back with him, Walter thought she was going to decline his offer. He had not considered a lease arrangement. In fact, he did not think she would part with her recipe.

"Oh, I'm very happy." He rose from his chair and stood by the desk. "I wholeheartedly accept your part-time offer. I must say that I hadn't considered the possibility of a lease agreement, but I can understand your position. My attorney and I will review your contract. I'm sure we can come to a mutual understanding."

He walked over and extended his hand. She rose and shook it.

She took her seat, "I have one more request. I don't think you know this, but my husband, Nick, and I only live here nine months out of the year — February through October. The other months we spend at our winter home. Plus, we take a two-week vacation in July." She was beginning to wonder if she was being too bold. "I hope this won't be a problem."

Walter returned to his desk chair. "No, not at all. I'll be happy to work around your schedule. I have so

much faith in your talents. I think you're going to be a big asset to the company; I'll do almost anything to get you onboard.

"Do you have a name for your candy?" Walter had never thought to ask this question before.

"We call it Claus Candy," she answered.

He was quiet for a moment. "I like it. Claus Candy will become our Christmas candy. We don't have one. If we go to work on it now, I think we could have some ready for Christmas. It's going to be tight, though. I'll call a meeting for tomorrow morning and get the process started. How soon can I get your recipe? It will take some time converting it into a mass production recipe."



SEVERAL DAYS later Walter enthusiastically signed the contract Sadie brought to him. After the contract was signed, she gave him a copy of the recipe.

"You don't have to worry, Sadie, I'll protect this recipe just like it's pure gold, which I hope it'll turn out to be."

Walter agreed to pay Sadie a commission on the total sales of Claus Candy. In addition, he agreed to her

request to provide free candy every Christmas to the orphanages and children's hospitals in the state.

A red and white wrapper was designed that featured a drawing of Mr. & Mrs. Santa Claus. Sadie was adamant that the drawing would not look like her and Nick. Walter agreed even though he was disappointed; he thought their image would be perfect.

Claus Candy became an instant success that first Christmas. Walter was very surprised, but pleased at how well it sold in such a short time. He had to rearrange production schedules and operate Saturday shifts in order to fill the orders. It was their busiest Christmas season ever.

At the annual North American Confectioners' convention held early the next year, the Sweet Tooth Candy Company had one of the most popular booths. Word had gotten out and Walter and his sales team were overwhelmed with curious merchants from the minute the convention started until it closed two days later.

When he returned to the candy factory, he excitedly announced to his employees that the sales for Claus Candy would be "at least eight times greater than last year. We're going to have one of the most popular Christmas candies this season. We owe it all to Sadie and her wonderful recipe — a truly unique candy."

Then he proudly announced. "You'll all get an extra bonus in your next paycheck."

The employees gathered in the cafeteria clapped and cheered with chants of "Sadie! — Sadie! — Sadie!" This was a proud and happy moment for them as well.

Sadie was still uncomfortable with all the attention. She declined to say anything when Walter asked her to speak. Instead, she just waved, said thanks and flashed her warm smile.

When the cheering and applause stopped, he continued. "Plus, sales of all of our candies are going to be greater than last year. This is going to be our best year ever. You'll get another bonus at the end of the year." The wild cheering and applause started again.

As Sadie walked back to the kitchen, she was somewhat concerned by Mr. Thompson's news about the huge growth in sales of Claus Candy. The commission she received for the first year was large enough, but if the sales increased as large as predicted, what would she do with all that money? She never anticipated anything this big when she agreed to lease her recipe. She has always preferred a simple lifestyle, not one filled with complications, for very practical reasons.



“NICK, WE need to talk,” she told Nick as she entered his office.

“Okay, but give me a minute to finish this e-mail to Kirsten. I’m congratulating her on the improvements she’s made to the new doll’s face. Actually, it resembles Beverly’s face a little bit. You remember my student Beverly?” Sadie nodded as she took a seat.

She told him about the projected growth in Claus Candy orders. “What are we going to do with all that money?” she asked. “The money I received from last year’s sales was big enough — what about two hundred thousand dollars more? And Mr. Thompson thinks the sales could grow even bigger by early fall. What are we going to do?”

Nick was surprised; he did not have an immediate answer. “Two hundred thousand dollars, WOW!” he exclaimed. “We’ve got to figure something out, and soon.”



THE FOLLOWING week, Sadie was sitting in their family room. She was reading a novel about President John Adams and his wife, Abigail — two of her favorite

historical people. Like her and Nick, they had a strong and comfortable relationship. Her life with Nick had always been everything she expected, and much more — full of love, happiness and adventure.

Nick came in and sat in his favorite rocking chair, the one they bought at the High Point Furniture Market. She noticed that he looked tired. She watched him rub his eyes, slip off his shoes and lay his head back.

“Nick, are you okay? You look tired. Would you like a cup of hot chocolate and cookies?”

“I’m alright. I’m just a little tired. I’d really love some of your cookies and hot chocolate. They would give me the pep I need.”

When she came back Nick sat up in his chair, took the hot chocolate, sipped it and took a bite of cookie. “Is this a new recipe? I don’t remember this cookie. It’s good!”

“I was getting tired of baking the same cookies so I thought I’d make something different. It’s a new butter cookie recipe. I’m glad you like it. Dugan does, too.”

“Since we talked last week, I’ve been giving a lot of thought to the money you’re expecting from Claus Candy,” Nick took another cookie from the plate. “I still can’t believe it might be as much as you said. Have you given it any more thought?”

“Yes, I have. I’d like to set-up a scholarship for orphans; one large enough to pay all their education expenses. But, I’d like for them to earn the scholarship by making good grades and agreeing to pay a percentage of it back into the fund after they graduate. Hopefully, that would encourage students interested in going to college to study harder and make better grades. And by paying some of it back, they’d have the satisfaction of knowing they paid a portion of their education expenses. They’d also be helping other students to go to college.”

“That’s a good idea, honey. And I like the idea of challenging them to earn it. Giving back, as well as setting the bar high is always a good idea. Your compassion is one of the reasons I’m glad you’re my wife.”

Sadie was happy Nick liked her idea. “We can add commission money from future sales. Once it gets started I don’t want it to run out of money.”

“I don’t think that’ll happen.” Nick looked at her and thought a minute. “I don’t want our names to be associated with the scholarship, though. It would be better that way.”

“You’re right, of course. Can you find someone to set up the scholarship program?”

“I’ll find someone.”

Sadie was relieved that a good plan had been made for the money. She could also sense that Nick was relieved, too.



“I’M LOOKING forward to fall,” Sadie said while she and Nick took a stroll together around the neighborhood. Sadie usually preferred to confine her outdoor activities to gardening or sitting on the back porch reading, knitting or watching the children play. “Each year gets better and better.”

“Having four seasons is nice,” Nick took Sadie’s hand. “Summer is my favorite. But I do enjoy the colors of spring and fall. It’s just nice having green trees and plants all year long. Something we’d never experienced before.”

“There are times when I feel sad and homesick thinking about our winter home and friends,” she added. “Yet, I enjoy our new life and these wonderful seasons — like today.”

“I miss everything, too,” responded Nick.

“But, we made the right decision,” she said. “I don’t want you to think I regret leaving and moving here, because I don’t. It’s been a wonderful experience. Dugan also thinks so. We

were talking about it just the other week.”

“I’m glad to hear that you and Dugan are happy. Because I’m very happy and satisfied.”

“I love going home in the winter, though. I love the winters, and I love our work,” she added.

“We’re extremely fortunate,” replied Nick.



“THIS IS better, Sadie, I think you’ve got it. Let us compare it again with the other one,” Bertha remarked after she and Dean ate several pieces of Sadie’s new candy that she had been working on for the past seven weeks.

Bertha and Dean work with Sadie in the Sweet Tooth Candy kitchen.

The kitchen was located in the south wing of the factory, close to Walter’s office, who described it as the “heart and soul” of the factory. Sadie, Bertha and Dean work at well-equipped individual workspaces that are outfitted with stainless steel fixtures, large ovens and ranges, ample storage and plenty of counter space.

“The texture is creamier and the taste is richer. I don’t know how you do it, Sadie. We all use the same ingredients, but your candies are always better. There’s something special about your candy — something unexplainable. I wish I had your touch,” said Dean, who has worked for the candy company since it was established.

“Thank you very much,” said Sadie. “But, you and Bertha are also good candy makers. Your recipes have made this company successful, and you should be proud of that. Look how sales of the bitter-sweet lollipops have jumped since you re-worked the recipe.”

“That might be true, but I’ve never created anything to match Claus Candy,” Dean replied.

“I agree,” said Bertha. “There’s no candy on the market like it. But, this new candy might come close.”

“Maybe it’s time to get a focus group together and see what they think,” commented Dean. “I’ll tell the boss we’re ready. Do you have any ideas for a name?”

Why don’t we call it “Sadie” suggested Bertha. Sadie just laughed, blushed and went back to work.

Dean went to his computer and typed an e-mail to Walter.

< Boss,
< We’d like you to stop by and sample Sadie’s
new candy. Bertha and I agree it’s ready for
your approval. If you like it then we need to

test it with the focus group. We still don't have a name. Do you have any ideas?

< Dean

Dean is the only employee who's allowed to call Walter "boss." He was the first person Walter hired.



NICK'S CLASS had just returned from lunch and was getting settled in their seats. Nick rose from his desk, walked and stood in front of the white board and faced the class. "Tomorrow we're going to have a math test." A universal groan came from the class. "We're going to spend the next few minutes reviewing the material."

"Mr. Kerstman."

"Yes, Denise."

"Do we have too? I'm still having trouble making change. Will that be on the test?"

"This test will not include money, but the next test will. For tomorrow's test you'll use paper and pencils — no calculators. Right now we're going to have a verbal review. I'm going to read a word problem, and I'll call on one of you to answer.

“First problem: You have twenty-seven birthday presents. Nine presents came from your family, and your friends gave the rest to you. How many presents did your friends give you? David, what’s the answer?”

“Wait, let me think. ... Twenty-seven subtract nine is uh ... uh ... uh ... eighteen, I think?”

“Tony, does David have the correct answer?”

Tony was not expecting Nick to call on him. “Yes, sir ... gimme a minute ... eighteen plus nine equals twenty-seven. David’s right.”

“That’s good, boys. Tony, I like the way you checked his answer”

“Now for the second problem. Jimmy, you answer this one. There are fifty-six passengers in bus A and thirty-nine passengers in bus B. How many passengers are in the two buses?”

Jimmy took a moment and answered “ninety-five.”

“Chris, is ninety-five the correct answer?”

“Uh ... yes, sir, it is.”

“Very good. The next problem is for Denise. Denise, there are eight oranges in a box. How many oranges would you have if there were thirteen boxes of oranges?”

“Mr. Kerstman, give me a harder problem.”

“Okay Denise, but first what is the answer?”

After a few seconds, Denise answered, “One hundred and four oranges.”

“Correct. Now, here’s the harder problem you wanted: You have eighteen cartons of footballs and each carton contains eight balls. If you give seven balls to me, ten balls to Tony, and thirteen balls to Chris, how many balls would you have left?

“Gimme a second ... uh ... I’d have ... wait a second ... one hundred and fourteen balls,” answered Denise.

“Very good Denise.”

Nick returned to his desk, leaned against it and began to speak. “Your test tomorrow will include questions like these, plus, some two-digit multiplication and division problems. These questions are examples of how math is used in our daily lives. We don’t always have columns of numbers to add or subtract, or math problems to solve. Math is just part of everyday living.”

As he turned to walk to the white board Beverly spoke.

“Mr. Kerstman, tell us about the elves. How do they make all the toys? Please tell us.”

“Beverly, we’ve got more math to review. Don’t you want to be prepared for tomorrow’s test?”

“Yes, but I want to hear about the elves, too.”

“You and I can talk when school is over, before you go to the bus.”

“Oh, thank you Mr. Kerstman,” she excitedly replied.



SEVERAL STUDENTS stayed with Beverly to talk with Nick. He wasn't sure what he was going to say. It would have been easier talking just to Beverly, but now he had seven.

He lingered at his desk to give himself more time to think. After a few minutes, he rose and moved his chair to where they were sitting.

"So, all of you want to know about elves and how they make the toys that Santa delivers."

"Yes, we do," answered Beverly.

"Well, we all know that elves help Santa. We know they live at the North Pole and work an entire year making toys. To make all the toys Santa needs for Christmas, he has to have lots of elves, and they have to be good workers. I imagine Santa probably has a number of workshops where the elves make specific toys and games. He probably has workshops that only make dolls, some that make trains and cars, and others that make electronic toys and games. I imagine the elves enjoy their work and especially like working with Santa.

"Santa's Village must be a neat place, don't you think? It's where elves make toys and games for boys and girls like you. I imagine that it must be a wonderful place to live and work.

"But since the North Pole is at the top of the world, we know it's a very cold place with lots of snow.

“Since Santa and the elves love children and want to make toys for them, they probably don’t mind all the snow and extremely cold temperatures.”

Beverly spoke up and asked, “What about the reindeer? Tell us about them.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s all the time we have. It’s time for you to catch your buses.”

They thanked him and began walking to the door. Beverly walked over to Nick and put her arms around as much of his waist as she could reach. “I love you Santa ... I mean Mr. Kerstman.” He hugged her back and then turned and said goodbye to the students. “Don’t forget to study for the math test.”



“I’M NOT going to do good on that math test; word problems are hard for me,” remarked Beverly as she and Denise took their seats on the school bus. “I just don’t like math. It’s too hard.”

“My brother told me he didn’t have word problems until the third grade,” Beverly continued. “He’s smart in math, too. If I fail my mom and dad are going to be really mad.”

“Beverly believes in Santa Claus! ... Beverly believes in Santa Claus!” chanted Jeff, who was sitting in front of her. He turned to face her and continued, “Beverly believes in Santa

Claus! ... Beverly believes in Santa Claus!” Others joined in the chanting.

“Hush up, Jeff. All of you stop saying that,” Beverly demanded in a loud voice. “Mr. Kerstman is Santa; he knows about elves and how toys are made. He told us about it today.”

Jeff replied, “That doesn’t make him Santa just because he told you about elves and toys. I can make up something, too.”

“Well he is, I just know he is. And I don’t care if you believe or not, because I do.”

Jeff faced back to the front of the bus after the driver told him to be quiet and to turn around.

Beverly and Denise sat quietly.

Beverly was the first to speak. “You believe he’s Santa don’t you? Don’t you remember what he said about Santa’s Village and the elves and the workshops? I just know he’s Santa Claus. You believe too, don’t you?”

“He looks like Santa, and he really likes kids, but I still don’t believe. How can he deliver all those toys in one night? No one can do that.” Denise knew she had disappointed her best friend. They have been neighbors and best friends since they were four years old. She does not understand why Beverly has not stopped believing like her other friends.

“Well, I don’t care what you or anyone else thinks,” Beverly turned to look at Denise. “I know Mr. Kerstman is Santa Claus. Someday you’ll see.”

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