

“Lucky Nate”

a holiday story for friends and family
by Bo Wilson

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The old man sat very still on his bench, letting the December sun warm his face. It was the kind of day where you can really feel it, when feeling it makes a difference. He closed his eyes, so as to warm even his eyelids. At moments like this, he wished his beard were dark instead of white, so that even it could make the most of the sun's goodness. But even so, it felt very fine.

He heard light footsteps approaching. He understood at once that the boy in the big hat had finally found the courage he'd been seeking for the last half hour. The boy had been pacing in front of the building across the street, back and forth, pretending very hard *not* to be looking toward the old man, so of course the truth of things had been clear. It happened sometimes. He knew it was December, he knew what he looked like, with his beard and his belly, so he knew what some kids believed he might be, and why on earth discourage that?

He opened his eyes, and beheld the boy, and the very large hat. It didn't want to stay on the boy's head, falling forward or back, but it was cold, and any hat was better than none, so the boy held onto it, shivering there in his thin jacket.

They looked at one another for a time.

The old man always enjoyed this part. It was so perfectly, utterly frank. The unabashed curiosity. Sometimes they took a little while working up the nerve, but once they approached, and once they stood right there, feeling the man's eyes upon them, they knew there was nothing to worry about.

"Are you Santa?" asked the boy, just as the old man had known he would.

Thus prepared, he was careful not to indicate yes or no. He said only "Is there something you'd tell me, if I were him?"

The boy suddenly looked doubtful. The old man opened his hand, as though to receive something, and said "If you have a message for Santa, I can do my very best to make sure he gets it. How about that? Anyway, why keep it quiet? You don't use it up by telling me."

The boy thought about this, and then nodded slowly, nearly losing his hat as he did, then looking up at the man. "I'm not asking for myself. I'm too big to worry about things like Christmas presents, anyway."

The old man nodded, and waited. He was good at waiting when there was more to come, and there almost always was.

The boy continued. "It's for my aunt, and my uncle, and my uncle's sister. I guess she's my aunt, too. They look after me. I want Christmas presents for them. Is that... am I allowed to ask for that?"

The old man regarded the boy, and nodded again. Then he said "I think I have exactly the thing you need. But before I can give it to you, I have to tell you a story, does that sound fair?"

The boy shrugged carefully. "I guess."

The old man could see the slim lad struggling to appear at ease, to control his shivering, so he slipped his outer coat from around his shoulders and placed it around the boy. It seemed to nearly swallow him whole. The old man said "It's not fair to make you listen to a story while you're freezing to death, you won't be able to really pay attention."

The boy, now nearly vanished inside the large hat and the larger coat, issued a muffled "Thank you."

The old man said "You're very welcome," and then he narrowed his eyes, as though seeing the story he planned to tell on some far horizon. Then he took a deep breath, and began: "When I was a much younger man-- which is to say, long ago, in a very *different* life, you take my meaning?"

The boy nodded.

"Good lad. Way back in that other time, I had a friend named Nate Elswick, and it pains me to say it but it's the simple truth, you never met a man with less luck. If Nate bet on the game, his team would lose. If a tree fell in his block, it would find a way to hit his roof. Or his car. Or both. If Nate had three kings, the other guy had three aces. You ever meet anyone like that?"

"I don't know," the boy answered.

"Oh, you'd know," said the old man. "If Nate went into the bathroom, there was no paper left on the roll. If he needed to catch the bus, he'd see it just pulling away as he got to the stop. If he raked the leaves out of his yard, what do you think would happen that same night?"

The boy thought, then said "A wind would blow them all back again?"

"That's right," beamed the old man, as warm as the sun overhead. The boy was beginning to feel quite good, almost sleepy, as he listened to the story and felt so warm inside the nice big coat. The old man continued: "I knew Nate for a number of years, and in all those years, it was always the same. He couldn't even win a coin flip. I saw a quarter come up heads seventeen times in a row once, just because Nate kept calling tails. But do you know the strangest thing?"

"No," said the boy.

The old man spread his arms as though still unable to believe what he was about to say. "In all that time, I never once saw Nate look unhappy. He was never disappointed. He was never upset. When some piece of bad luck would happen to him, he would *smile*! And then he would say 'Well, at least it didn't happen to someone worse off.' And then he'd just get back to whatever it was he was trying to do."

"He sounds nice," ventured the boy.

“Oh, he was,” agreed the old man. “One of the nicest fellows you could ever hope to meet. But it was a puzzle to me, how a man could endure such bad fortune and come out of smiling. So: One day I asked him about it, straight out. ‘Nate,’ I said, ‘You’re one of the best men I ever met, you’ve always got time to help a neighbor or to listen to a friend, and you’re the most cheerful fellow that there ever was, so you’ve got to tell me-- does it *ever* get to you?’

“Nate looked at me like I’d spoken Russian or something, and he said ‘Does *what* ever get to me?’ I couldn’t believe he was going to make me spell it out but I was determined to get an answer, so I looked him right in the eye and I said ‘You must be the unluckiest sunuvagun I ever saw in all my days, and I’ve been around for a lot of days, so just tell me-- how do you take it?’ And do you know what he did?”

“What?” whispered the boy, rapt.

“He *laughed*.”

“Why?” asked the boy.

The old man shrugged. “I had no idea! But he laughed, and he laughed, and he laughed some more, and pretty soon *I* got to laughing, too, just because *he* was laughing, you know how that can happen sometimes?”

The boy nodded. He knew.

“After a minute, Nate’s wife came out to see what all the fuss was about, and that made us laugh even harder, and after a minute, she threw up her hands and went back inside. And Nate watched her go, and as our laughter wore itself out, he said ‘That’s your answer, you know.’ I wasn’t sure what he meant, and I must have looked like it, because he pointed at the door his wife had gone through, her name was Alice, and he said ‘Her. Alice. She’s how.’ ”

The old man paused to make sure the boy was still following him, and then continued. “I wasn’t sure what he meant, so I asked him, and he looked at me and I tell you, it was almost like he felt sorry for me. Then he said ‘Once, there was a time when I had the same luck as anyone, you know? Sometimes lucky, sometimes not, but normal, like most people. And then I met Alice. And I guess there was never a fellow more in love with anyone than I was with Alice. But I didn’t know how to tell her, you know? I was shy. And one day she walked right up to me and said she had something to tell me. She told me that she thought it was time she got married, and that it seemed to her like I was the right man for that job, and did I think I might be interested in being her husband? Well, you’d better believe I said yes, as fast as I could, and I was busy thanking heaven that she’d had whatever it took to ask me when I’d been so fearful of it, you see?’

“Well, I didn’t quite see, and I said so, and Nate smiled at me again, and he leaned close, like he was sharing a secret...” and the old man leaned close to the boy, who leaned closer to hear, and the old man continued: “... and Nate almost whispered ‘She’s my luck. Her asking me that, that

was all the luck a man gets in one lifetime, probably more, it just all happened in that one instant, you see? So when you ask me about how it feels to be unlucky... how can I even answer you? She's my luck. She's all the luck I could ever hope for.' ”

The old man let this idea sit for a moment, and he could see the boy working it over in his mind. Then the old man said “That’s the story I needed you to hear. Now are you ready for the present I promised you?”

The boy nodded.

The old man put his hands gently on the shoulders of his coat, feeling the small shoulders deep beneath it, and he said “I believe there are people in your life who are *your* luck, just like Alice was Nate’s. And so your present is a simple command:

Tell them so.

Tell them they’re your luck, and that you know it, and that you’re grateful for it. And do you know what?”

“What?” asked the boy.

The old man smiled. “It’ll be two presents in one. It’ll be a present for whoever you tell... and it will be a present for you, too. You’ll see. Tell them. Tell them how lucky they make you. And you’ll have as merry a Christmas as anyone could ask.”

The boy stood for a moment thinking about this, and then nodded, and said “Okay.” Then he began shrugging out of the coat, but the old man stopped him. “Keep it. I’m warm enough. It’s too big for you, but you’ll grow into it.”

“Are you my luck?” the boy whispered.

The old man chuckled, a rich and rolling sound. “Maybe. Or maybe you’re mine. Merry Christmas, lad.”

“Merry Christmas,” said the boy, and then he turned, and the old man watched the big hat and the big coat move away into the lengthening shadows that would soon become the darkness of Christmas Eve.