

All I want for Christmas

by Christopher Peter

www.christopher-peter.com

I knew there was something wrong about Mr Nicholas the moment I saw him. What happened on that bitter Thursday, six days before Christmas, only confirmed it.

I needed the money. Presents to buy. So when I saw the yellowing card hanging limply inside the door of Nicholas Toys – *Help Needed – Apply Within* – I didn't think twice. I must have passed that mean, murky little shop a hundred times without really noticing it. Now it seemed to have sprung to some kind of life, its stringy fairy lights twinkling through the driving sleet.

Shivering as I pushed through the door, I somehow expected dust and gloom inside, but instead I was greeted by glaring neon light beating down from the ceiling. A sharp smell prickled the back of my throat – plastic, cheap cinnamon-spiced air freshener, and lurking somewhere beneath a faint acrid stench that reminded me of leaking batteries. And it was so cloyingly hot I was already peeling off my scarf and coat when he shuffled through a half-hidden doorway.

He must have been the oldest person I'd ever seen. Hunched like a question mark, his face so creased his wrinkles cast shadows. But his pale blue eyes focussed on me with keen attention.

'Er ... Mr Nicholas? I've come about the job ...?'

He smiled thinly. 'When can you start?' His voice was a parched, wheezing whisper, like dead leaves in the wind.

Why he needed me I don't know. The shop was deserted for two hours. Until, just before midday, the customer walked in. She might have been twenty-five or forty years old, it was hard to tell. Her face was blank and candle-white; mottled makeup fringed the purple ghost of a black eye. She scurried around the shop like a hunted mouse. Eventually she appeared again at the counter and spoke in my general direction.

'Have you got the any Dizzy Dolls?' she intoned in a defeated voice.

I thought – you're kidding, right? Dizzy Dolls were this year's must-have toy, a random craze that had emptied shelves and warehouses across the country. Of course, in that perverse sheep-like mentality of human nature, its very scarcity had only sharpened the population's desire. If there had ever been any in this shop, they'd have been put right in the window, the price marked up and gone within hours. If not minutes.

But I just smiled. 'I'm afraid not, madam. Have you tried online ...?'

She snorted. OK, I thought, dumb question.

I flinched as Mr Nicholas suddenly spoke from right beside me. 'Can I help you madam?'

'I need a Dizzy Doll,' she whined. 'My eldest doesn't want anything else. I just *have* to get one.'

'Then it's your lucky day madam!' The proprietor grunted as he reached behind the counter and hauled up a lurid, oversized pink-and-purple monstrosity of a box. And to my amazement, poking out through the top was the perfectly-groomed peroxide head of a Dizzy Doll, regarding me balefully with its plastic stare.

The woman gasped. 'Oh ... oh *awesome!*' Then she glanced warily at me. 'Is it *genuine?*'

It's not the freaking Mona Lisa, I nearly said. But Mr Nicholas got in first. 'Of course, madam. But it's the last one left, mind. I don't need to tell you ...'

'Oh ...' She looked slyly away. 'You know, I've seen them on special offer on ebay. Half price ...'

It was a ridiculous lie. But Mr Nicholas' smile widened. 'I understand, madam. We'll match that price. But there is something else ...' While I wondered if he'd lost his mind, he produced a pen and a

sheet of paper with some writing I couldn't read. 'The total cost is on this contract, madam. Just your signature required. And then it's yours.'

'Oh really?' The woman wrinkled her nose and took the paper. She studied it; then looked up sharply. 'Is this supposed to be funny?'

The old man actually grinned, baring yellowish but surprisingly straight teeth. 'No joke madam. Just sign and this Dizzy Doll is yours. Imagine your little girl's face on Christmas morning!' But as he leant on the counter with affected nonchalance, he was betrayed by his wide, ravenous eyes. A born salesman after all, then. But what was on that contract? Maybe it was double the normal price, or even more?

The woman eyed him. Then looked back at the door and made a slight motion to leave. But when she turned back, her face was like the old man's, shining with a bright and nauseous lust. She shrugged and signed the paper on the counter. 'You're crazy,' she muttered, before grabbing the box and half-jogging from the shop.

When I turned back to Mr Nicholas, he was bowed down as if exhausted – but I saw on his shadowed face a deep, dreamy smile. As if he'd just made the sale of the year.

'What was the price?' I asked.

He looked up slowly. 'High,' he said, and gave a dry chuckle. 'And what about you, Peter?'

'What do you mean?'

'What do *you* want? More than anything else?'

I tried to laugh. 'I don't have any kids. And I'm not really into toys myself ...'

'I deal in more than toys, Peter. A lot more. Sure, it's one of my most ... profitable areas. But I can get you *anything*. What do you want, Peter?'

'Oh I, um ...' A volley of icy rain rattled the window pane and I glanced at the door. 'Um ... look, it's lunch-time ... do you mind if I take my break now ...?'

He drew himself up; and for one insane moment I thought he might run across the shop and lock the door. I don't know why I thought that. But he just nodded. 'Of course. See you soon, Peter.'

Once outside, revived by the cold air, I tried to find her. I ran. But she'd gone.

I never went back to the shop.