

A Holy Roast  
A Short story  
By  
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1.

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, give it up for a man who somehow combines stand-up, frat parties, and his multiple midlife crises into a single act: The Instrument!” the Emcee announced. He was thin, tall, and had high cheekbones that seemed to tower over his collared shirt and bowtie.

The roaring crowd at the comedy roast sat in a black auditorium that was devoid of light except for warmly glowing strings of Christmas lights wrapped all around the handrails that reflected in sparkling silver against tinsel strung up all about the ceiling rafters. From the left-hand side of the stage, an enormous middle-aged man bounded into sight of the audience. He was shirtless. The crowd shrieked incessantly for the man. Holding a liquor bottle in one hand and a diet soda in the other, the man leapt up to the microphone and addressed his fans with a series of lewd, risqué, and coarse statements, which the crowd responded to with uproarious laughter. He wrapped up his set by tilting his head back and chugging from his liquor bottle.

The crowd thundered with response, chanting his name.

“In-stru-ment! In-stru-ment!”

The Instrument gave a bow, swaying drunkenly on his knees, then teetered over to a chair in the center of the stage some feet back from the microphone. He plopped down with a thud, the chair legs sliding and creaking clamorously against the wooden stage floor.

His colleagues, fellow famous comedians, all lined up in chairs in the front of the auditorium facing the stage, stood up one by one to take their turns in succession jovially ridiculing him.

“The Instrument is a generous guy,” squawked a short, thin man with narrow, slanted dark brown eyes, dark, thin eyebrows, a receding hairline, and a pointed nose that complemented the angular features of his face in a shrill, grating voice. “At the end of the night he’ll buy everyone in the bar a round...” the comedian continued, “ON THEIR OWN TAB!”

An enormous guffaw exploded from the spectators.

“His Netflix specials have generated billions....IN REHAB REFERRALS!”

A similar effect upon the audience.

The Instrument rocked back and forth in his chair, his gut shaking with each guttural belly laugh he let out. He downed several more swigs of his bottle, and his face began to glow with an intoxicated red blush.

After several similar disparaging remarks, it was time for the next comedian to make his stabs. Wearing all black, a button-down collared shirt, tie, and slacks, a tall black man with a newly shiny, shaved head who was smoking a cigarette took the podium next.

“You know, Instrument,” the newest comedian remarked, “you’re the only person I know who thinks alcohol is a performance enhancing drug.”

The audience chuckled.

“But what’s even more incredible are your stories! Getting mistaken for a gangster...partying with Russian mob members...the only thing more incredible than your stories is that your audience is still awake at the end of your telling them!”

At this, the audience laughed a bit more, but nervously.

“They call you The Instrument...what *kind* of instrument? A self-playing piano? You get him started and he just tells the same three stories over and over!”

Boom! Resounding laughter from the crowd.

Another long pull from The Instrument’s liquor bottle. His face was now bright as a freshly picked strawberry.

After the second comedian stepped down, a final one took the stage. A middle-aged woman, with an ovular head, prominent cheekbones, and thick, black eyebrows, she stood tall and slender, with long, black hair pulled back in a ponytail. She had a look of being constantly amused, with the edges of her mouth always slightly curled upward in the shape of a grin, ready to let out whatever sassy remark floated into her head at any given moment.

She took the microphone, and turning to The Instrument, said:

“You’re shirtless so much, Instrument, I am starting to wonder if you are allergic to cotton!”

The audience loved her demeaning series of observations and witticisms about the overweight comedian they were roasting, too. A few minutes later, the woman wound down to her final undignified utterance.

“Your body isn’t a temple. It’s an abandoned amusement park!”

With a bow followed by blowing the audience a kiss, after which she turned toward The Instrument again, cocked her head, and shook it in mock-disapproval, the woman began making her exit from the stage. The Instrument was drawing strength from the chaotic energy of the comedy scene and made a few riffs back at the woman this time, before hooting at her several times before she rolled her eyes and walked off the stage, retaking her place in her chair facing the stage.

The Emcee came back to the forefront once more.

“Thank you, thank you,” he said, motioning for the crowd to quiet down, all the while never breaking a toothy grin, “always a hilarious treat, that one. Beautiful, too! Well, Instrument, it’s time for you to come up here and make your defense! Come on up!”

With that, the Emcee and The Instrument changed places, and The Instrument took the podium. He looked out at the crowd, his eyes reflecting the soft glow of Christmas lights, his cheeks rosy red. The spectators quieted down to a hush, waiting with bated breath to hear what he was going to say. A few moments of quiet passed, and then he opened his mouth as if to speak.

Nothing came out but a loud, guttural belch! It shook his belly and resounded off the walls of the auditorium, echoing repeatedly.

The audience laughed the hardest they had laughed yet. One tuxedo-clad man up in the balcony bent over laughing to such a degree that he nearly fell off, and it took three other people grabbing him and pulling him back to prevent him from plummeting over.

With a wave of both of his hands, The Instrument teeter-tottered his way off the stage, exiting to the rear, disappearing behind the velvety red curtain. He swayed drunkenly and his belly jiggled with each step as he went. The Emcee took the podium again.

“Let’s give it up for The Instrument!”

The crowd unleashed yet another cacophony of claps, yells, hollers, screams, and cheers. Finally, they gradually grew quiet again and listened for the Emcee's next announcement.

"Well, now for a special treat! We are going from someone who drinks like a fish to someone who's probably spent a whole lot of Fridays eating fish in his early days- he's just as jolly if not more, though! You know him, you love him, that great giver of gifts, flies around in a sled one night each year, that's right folks, it's Kris Kringle, Father Christmas, the jolly old elf himself, Santa Claus! Let's hope he brought his reindeer, folks, because *this* room is gonna need lots of gifts to recover from this lineup!"

The crowd hooted and hollered once more, excited to hear the unexpected guest for the holiday-themed special announced. Once again, their cheering, shouting, and guffawing in eager anticipation came to a crescendo, and then gradually died down.

In the back of the auditorium, at the center of the aisle, a door swung open. A bright, white light poured out of the door, filling the darkened auditorium. Everyone grew silent. The spectators looked on, twisting, and craning their necks to see the newcomer who would soon be walking down the aisle to take the stage. A silhouette was all they could see, casting a long shadow that stretched down the aisle and onto the stage. Step by step, a figure grew closer to the auditorium, until finally, he emerged through the doorway and joined the crowd of spectators, who all at once could see him.

The audience fell to a complete hush. Some of them frowned. Others looked around expectantly, sure that this was a mistake, or that perhaps this was part of another, more elaborate joke. The man who now walked down the center aisle did not appear as they had expected. For one, he was quite thin, emaciated around his cheeks, even. His skin was of a darker complexion than they had anticipated. He did not wear a thick, red coat. There was no red hat with a white ball at its tip upon his balding head. Instead, he wore red and gold robes that hung down to his feet with a white that hung over his shoulders, crossing at his chest and with golden crosses with black outlines embroidered in it. He bore a heavy looking book in his hands, and had a thick, graying, curling beard.

A murmur rippled through the crowd. In mere moments, they had become uneasy and uncertain at the appearance of this otherworldly man. Someone in the crowd near the front leaned close to his friend and whispered, "Is this a bit?" A woman in the balcony gripped her drink tighter as her eyes darted between the now frowning Emcee and the stranger, while her husband unconsciously fidgeted with the pin on his lapel. Others shifted in their seats, uncomfortable with the reverential moment that had so quickly superseded the mirth of moments ago, something they did not understand.

As the figure, who had a commanding yet somehow seemingly humble presence traversed the space between the back door and the stage, wisdom and confidence seemed to emanate from him. Audience members instinctively fell silent as he passed them by, and they caught a glance of his powerful gaze coming from behind deep, dark eyes. The crowd's energy was morphing as he came, seeping away from the room. Their demeanor was one of confusion and unease as they began to grasp the gravity of what was unfolding before them: for walking among them down the aisle toward the stage was not the modern Santa Claus they had expected at all, but rather Saint Nicholas of Myra.

St. Nicholas strode slowly forward and made his way to the chair at the back of the stage. He sat down, not making a sound, and looked steadily forward, his gaze panning out over the awed crowd, who looked on expectantly.

The Emcee now had visible dribbles of sweat forming on his forehead. He frantically shuffled through cue cards in his hand. Apparently, he, too, had been expecting a stereotypical, commercialized Santa Claus wearing all red, and his cue cards told him nothing of the figure who had appeared instead.

“Erm, we’re going to take a quick break, folks. Don’t go anywhere, we’ll be right back!” the Emcee announced, having touched his hand to his ear and gotten an announcement through his invisible earpiece.

As the crowd noise grew to a dull moan, this impromptu commercial break bought the program enough time for a man in a black suit and tie to scramble out from behind the velvet curtain and hand the Emcee a fresh set of cards. After a few minutes, the cameramen took their places once more, the little lights on the dashboard of the broadcasting equipment went from red to green, and the Emcee wiped his brow, looked into the camera, smiled, the crowd quieted once more, and he began.

“Welcome back, everybody! It seems that we have a *very* special surprise tonight, for we have the *actual, original* Saint Nicholas of Myra, the first century Christian bishop who Santa Claus is based on! You may have heard of him, he is known for being generous, a fervent defender of Christianity, and working miracles! Ladies and gentlemen, I give you *the* Saint Nicholas!”

The Emcee slid to the side of the podium and held his hand out palm upward, indicating the Saint seated behind him. The Saint did not move. He sat firmly grounded on the chair, merely keeping his gaze fixed out on the audience. After a couple of awkward moments, the Emcee, whose new sweat glittered in the light of the Christmas bulbs, stepped back to the podium.

“Okay, then, I guess we will go straight to the roasters. Come on up!” and he introduced the first comedian again. “I hope good old St. Nick knows what he’s getting into, because this isn’t Bethlehem, folks, it’s ROAST CITY!”

The first, small, thin comedian who had roasted The Instrument rose and returned to the podium. He somehow seemed smaller and thinner in the presence of the Saint. He looked nervously out at the crowd for a moment, and then he began.

“W-well,” the comedian stammered, “honestly, I wasn’t prepared for this. I mean,” he took a deep breath, “I’ve roasted a lot of people in my day, politicians, celebrities, even my own mother-in-law! But a Saint? Geez. That’s a new one. I feel like I’ll need to confess after this set! And I’m not even Catholic or nuthin’!”

The crowd let out a few cautious giggles. This seemed to give the comedian a tiny bit more confidence.

“I mean, how do you roast a guy who spent his whole life helping the poor and punching heretics? If you try to roast a firefighter, people will hate you! And I hear this guy has a mean left hook. I don’t want to get punched or burned!”

The audience laughed a little bit more, if still nervously.

The comedian tried a few more quips, but seemed uncomfortable making them, and they did not produce the uproarious laughter that his previous ones against The Instrument had.

“Aw, you know what, I’m done,” the comedian finally declared, still smiling but clearly ready for this awkward performance to be over, “I would love to go all-out on this roast, but I feel like if I do, lightning will strike me on this stage! It’s hard to be funny when you’re worried about spontaneous combustion!”

With that, the comedian left the podium and returned to his seat, trying very hard not to make eye contact with the Saint, who remained steadfast, looking confident and calm and sitting resolute. The next comedian took the podium.

"Well, I came up here ready to throw some jokes at him, but then I realized- this is *Saint* Nicholas! What am I going to say? I love your charity work? Here he is, giving gold so that a poor man's daughters are saved from prostitution, and I am trying to hold onto as much money as I can from my shows, and I can't even cope with spending \$40 at Target, and that is mostly blowing the money on junk I don't need!"

Some scattered chuckles from the spectators.

"St. Nicholas is out here performing miracles, giving to the poor, saving lives- meanwhile, I think I'm amazing for giving a homeless man a dollar. But not before checking my wallet to make sure it's not my last dollar!"

The audience gave a low, nervous giggle of solidarity with this statement.

"So I guess...my giving...it's a work in progress! I mean, look, here is a man who gave away *everything* and I'm over here saying 'yeah, sure, I'll donate my clothes to the homeless, as long as they're not this season's fashion and not that itchy sweater my stepmom gave me!"

A few more, slightly bolder laughs from the audience. The comedian bowed, thanked the audience, turned and bowed to the Saint reverently, then retook his seat.

Finally, the female comedian rose and came to the stage. She did not once even glance at the pious man sitting at the back of the stage, instead strutting straight to the podium and launching her roast into the microphone.

"So this is Saint Nicholas? Good old St. Nick. The man. The legend. He gave *everything* away to the poor. Can we talk about that for a minute? I can't even give my roommate my leftover pizza without thinking about how much food enjoyment I am giving up. How *exactly* does someone give so freely? And gold, of all things! He hands out gold like Christmas parades toss out candy! How does he do it? Where does this generosity come from?"

Nobody in the crowd seemed willing to dare to laugh at this.

"And he's a *saint*, y'all! '*Saint*' Nicholas!" she said, making air quotations with her fingers. "What gives him the right to be soooo holy with all this giving? I bet the families he saved by giving the gold were *really* grateful to him when he was getting all holy with his giving..."

The holy man did not budge one bit and remained with his gaze set forward, sternly and firmly. The crowd did not make a sound. The woman continued, challenging the reputation and works of the renowned historical holy figure on stage. All the while, he did not flinch or move a muscle, but sat powerfully and unfazed, letting her speak. The audience stayed mostly silent, some even dropping their mouths at the boisterous comedian's audacity at speaking so irreverently about this saintly person, others wearing expressions of discomfort on their faces as if they had eaten something that did not agree with them while she spoke.

"So Saint Nicholas, tell me-" the woman concluded, finally venturing a glance back at the man, "what's it like being the *original* good guy, the one who was all about helping others before it was cool? You could have kept all your wealth to yourself, lived like a king. But nooooo, you had to run around handing it all out to the less fortunate, solving people's problems left and right. Meanwhile here I am struggling to give away *anything*, even to give away a blow dryer to the Goodwill, because I keep thinking 'what if I need it later?' What makes you so special, what *motivates* a guy like you to be all goody two shoes?"

The woman walked off the stage after this to assorted claps and cautious cheers, and the Emcee took the podium again.

"Well, folks, we've heard about the best this or any panel could throw his way tonight! But let's face it; roasting a saint is no easy feat. Now it's time to see how he handles the spotlight! Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Saint Nicholas of Myra! The Emcee motioned to the saint, beckoning him to the podium.

For the first time since he had taken his seat, the saint moved. He rose slowly, solemnly walking to the podium. He placed his heavy book down upon it and rested both hands gently on

its sides. As his gaze rose to look out over the crowd, some audience members quivered, expecting a fierce and rebuking response. However, when he was ready to speak, his stern gaze grew gentle, and the audience felt reassured. They hushed, awaiting his words expectantly. Saint Nicholas took in a deep breath and spoke.

"You call me 'Old Saint Nick,'" he said with calm, measured, authority, "but it is the spirit behind the name that truly matters. I gave not for fame, nor for jest, but for the love of Christ, who gave His life for us all. The love of Christ compels us to give freely, not just from wealth, but from the heart. For in serving the least of these, we find our greatest treasure--eternal joy in Him who gave all. It was only through his grace that I was able to do those things. Without Him, we are nothing."

The crowd grew completely still. Any noise, the slightest murmur or smallest rustling, stopped. The saint continued.

"True faith is not in words alone, but in deeds that reveal Christ's mercy. In all things, my children, let love guide your words. For it is by love that the world is saved. These days the world may laugh at what it no longer understands, but grace--grace is the greatest gift, and it *still* waits for all those willing to receive it."

The saint paused, his gaze sweeping over the crowd. Utterly quiet, the crowd sat transfixed, struck by the wise old man's resonating words. The saint's voice then softened, but remained resolute.

"He came to die for us. This, children, is the greatest gift, and the greatest love."

With that, the saint raised his right hand and moved it upward, downward, and laterally, reaching out and blessing his audience. They remained perfectly still and quiet. Then he picked up his book, turned, and just as solemnly and with the same total noiseless manner as he came, stepped down from the stage, traversed the aisle, stepped through the auditorium's rear door, and was gone, leaving the assembled people, with the Emcee, comedians, and all looking on in stunned silence. The Emcee stood awestruck and still for a few long moments before coming back to himself, realizing the cameras were still rolling, and signaling for a commercial break.

Even after the show went to commercial, the crowd remained sitting in silence for a long time, with only glimmering light from the Christmas lights and tinsel dancing off their faces in the darkened room. From the tiptop of the balcony above, a pin slipped from the lapel of a man who sat leaning against the guardrail. It plummeted, turning over and over twinkling in the dark, before finally striking the ground below with a resounding clang.

THE END