
A Christmas Story

Ozzie climbed out of the dumpster. Stuffing two torn checkered tablecloths into the lining of his old overcoat, he ambled down the alley behind McGinty's. He was reaching into the nearest trash barrel when the door swung open. Ozzie shrunk into the shadows as someone struggled through with another barrel. The man looked up and smiled. "Hey Oz! How's it hangin'?"

Stepping out of the darkness, Ozzie flashed a gap-toothed grin. "Shriveled, Gonzales. Too fuckin' cold. Me 'n Mae shoulda headed south."

"Gotcha man." Hector Gonzales set the barrel next to the one Ozzie had been about to explore then wiped his hands on his soiled apron. He faced Ozzie. "Hey, I got somethin' for ya'. Hang on." When the young Mexican stepped inside, Ozzie hurried over to the new trash and pawed through it. He found a soggy, half-eaten loaf of Irish soda bread and stuffed it his pocket just as the door reopened. Gonzales glanced at the disturbed kitchen waste. "You don't hafta do that, amigo. Here, I snuck some goodies for you 'n Mae." He

handed Ozzie a bag containing a couple of smaller bags and a re-corked bottle of red wine. "Feliz Navidad, amigo."

Ozzie nodded and shuffled down the alley toward the street. He entered the next alley, squatted against the cold brick wall and opened the wine. Reflections from the amber streetlight danced on the green bottle as he emptied it in several large gulps. He tossed the empty into the darkness, startling a scavenging cat that yelped and hissed before scooting away. Opening the large sack he pulled out one of the smaller bags. He reached in, scooping handfuls of corned beef hash into his mouth. When it was empty, he tossed it deeper into the alley then tore open the other one. The still warm soda bread inside was a little dry going down, making him wish he still had some of the wine. While he chewed, his free hand explored the empty care package then tossed it away.

As he struggled to his feet, he spotted a candy cane, still wrapped in plastic, next to the dumpster. Shoving it in his pocket, he hurried two more blocks to a boarded up building, looking in all directions before he slipped down the alley to a side door and pried it open. He heard Mae coughing as he squeezed through. "Ozzie?"

“Yeah.” Pulling the door shut, he made his way to their nest of newspapers and old coats. He pulled the two tablecloths out and spread them over Mae then sat beside her and fished the soggy bread from his pocket. She ate between coughing bouts then moved closer, leaning against his shoulder.

“I got somethin’ else,” he said and pulled out the candy cane. He tore off the wrapping and broke it just below the crook. “Which piece you want?”

“The curve.” She grinned and hung it in her mouth.

“Merry Christmas,” he said and wrapped his coat around them both.