

# **Cold Snap**

*By Juris Ozols*

*The most decent man you would ever want to know? I give you Ralph: hard working Minnesotan, owner of a tidy dairy farm, pillar of the Lutheran church in his little "Up North" hamlet, wonderful husband, loving father. He coached his sons in three sports, lived and died with the varying fortunes of the Vikings and Twins, caught walleyes when nobody else could get a bite - just an all-around beautiful person.*

*And Ralph was renowned for keeping an even disposition, when faced with the vicissitudes of life, always made the best of whatever came his way. He lived life to the fullest.*

*So, when the time came to pass on to his reward, Ralph took events in stride, even though it didn't go quite the way he had expected. Let me tell you how that went.*

\*\*\*\*\*

At first, Nicodemus ignored the ringing of the telephone on his desk. After all, this was his empire, and he did as he liked. And at the moment, he was engrossed in his Mischief Plan for the next ten years. Phone call interruptions didn't help that any.

But the telephone kept ringing. Nick sighed. Well, it was time to take a break, anyway. He'd been tinkering with his Plan covering recruiting activities for some time now, and he pretty much had it figured out. He'd have to come up with something to entice a few famous cases Down Here, but otherwise it looked pretty good. Okay, he'd answer it.

But then, as Nick reached for the Red telephone, the blinking of the white light on the phone for the Special Connection riveted his attention. Nick paused, and his black tail twitched as he stared at the telephone. The perpetual sweat from the Infernal Temperatures all of a sudden ran cold down his forehead.

Nick pulled a red bandana from his pocket, and wiped the perspiration on his brow, being careful not to touch his horns. The welts from smashing his head against the wall in exasperation over the doings of Mother Teresa still ached, and had to be careful about that. But now, the telephone?

Well, even he - Old Nick - didn't ignore this call.

With a sigh, Nick gave in and swiveled his chair away from the PC on his desk. He ignored the "screech" from the squeaking wheels of his chair as he turned toward the Red Telephone on the credenza behind him. Nick never had the time to hunt up oil for them, and in any case, he was used to the noise.

He picked up the telephone.

“Yes?” Nick let his gaze wander out the picture window of his office toward the “Flame Pits” for processing of new arrivals. And as he did, the irritation at the dirty windows, covered with grease stains from the smoke of the pits, returned as usual. Damn! One of these days he’d have to get the windows cleaned up, so he could better relish the squirming of the newcomers...

The familiar, majestic tones sounded in his ear.

“Nicodemus, my Faithful Adversary,” chuckled the voice of God, “How are you, how are you?”

Baloney! God didn’t really care. And instantly, Nick popped a snappy answer. “Doin’ better’n you, Chief, I believe. You check out those numbers I emailed you?”

Nick took great pleasure in applying these little twists whenever he could of course. It was his job.

A pause. When God spoke again, the chuckle was gone.

“Well, yes, I did indeed look at them. But I knew it already. You’re getting more of them, more people, right now, than I am. I admit it. But I do have some plans in mind, some of my “Mysterious Ways,” as it were...”

Now Nick had to chuckle. “You thinkin’ to get that crony of yours, Moses, to help out? Hey! All he’s good for is installing dishwashers, as I understand it.” And Nicodemus cackled again, at his small joke.

God’s voice turned flat now. “You’re two stories behind, I’m afraid.”

“Sorry.”

**“Never mind. You’re not sorry. But listen, it’s interesting that you bring this up. As it happens, that’s what I need to talk to you about.”**

**This began to intrigue Nicodemus. What the Hell was God up to? He didn’t call down here very often, so something must be going on. But what was it? Nick reached behind his desk to get a can of Blatz Light out of the mini-bar in his credenza. He popped the can open, swiveled back around - “Screech...” again, dammit! - and leaned back in his chair.**

**Nick put his feet up on his desk and stared at the painting of “Elvis in Black Velvet” on the wall opposite him. The nice contrast of the painting against the red-flock wallpaper always appealed to him, even though he had to ignore the tears in the wallpaper from his horns. Damn! Again - something else to get done...**

**But the immediate question: What was God up to? “Yeah? Go on.”**

**“I need your help,” said God.**

**This historically unprecedented request so startled Nick that his legs straightened out before he could restrain himself. And the un-oiled wheels on his chair stuck solidly. Nick toppled over backwards, landing squarely on his tail on the floor behind him. And son-of-a-bitch, that hurt!**

**“BLAST!” yelled Nick. “DAMMIT!”**

**“I beg your pardon...”**

**“You do that on purpose?” shouted Nick into the telephone, waving his can of Blatz Light in the air and thereby splashing beer on his PC. And that irritated him even more. “Oh CRAP!”**

**“Nicodemus, are you alright?”**

**This was too much! Nick threw his beer can, still half full, at Elvis. It splashed as it hit the painting and left a foaming stain on Elvis’s sneering smile. But Nick didn’t care. He was furious. If he didn’t know God better, he would suspect all kinds of things. But God didn’t do that, did He? After all, He was God...**

**“Never mind. I’m fine. Hold it a sec.” Nick disentangled himself from the chair, got up, and sat down on the corner of his desk. “Whaddya want?”**

**A pause. Even God must have been taken aback by the strange sounds and accompanying curses emanating from the office of Nicodemus. And the explanation.**

**“Well, I must admit I’m a bit embarrassed, but here’s the thing. I’d like you to take in Ralph for a few days...”**

**This puzzled Nick. Ralph? Who was Ralph? He didn’t know of any “Ralph” due Down Here... But he obviously couldn’t let God know of his confusion. Time to stall, while he searched up “Ralph” on the Internet.**

**Nick cradled the telephone on his shoulder and started typing on the PC as he answered God. “Is that right? So why are you sending Ralph Down Here?”**

**A coughing noise came over the telephone, as if God were cleaning his throat. “Well, you see, it turns out that things are in a bit of disrepair, Up Here, at the moment. I’m refurbishing, sprucing up the place, remodeling. It so happens I’m terribly tight on room, for newcomers. So I’d appreciate if you’d put up Ralph for a few days, until I get things straightened out and then I’ll take him back. How’s that sound?”**

Nick had to wince as he looked around his own office. Damn! His place could sure use some “sprucing up” too. Was God trying to make him look bad? But then, was God capable of such mean little tricks?

Nick shook his head and then took a quick look at Ralph’s file on the screen of his PC. Well, no doubt about it at all. Ralph belonged Up There and not Down Here. So why should he help out?

“Yeah... I can see your problem. But listen, Chief, let me be honest with you.” Nick ignored the faint snort on the telephone. “Why should I do it? What’s in it for me?”

“Right. I thought you might ask that. Okay. Here’s the deal. You remember the Jeffrey Dahmer guy I sent Down to you a few years ago?”

Nick’s red eyes glowed with delicious memories. “Sure do, Chief, sure do. And I appreciated that, I really did. As it happens, I’ve got Jeff busy in my kitchens, indeed I do...”

God continued. “Well, here’s my offer, this time. It’s better. You put up Ralph for a few days, you get O.J.”

Nicodemus fell backwards off his desk.

Ever afterwards, he wondered if once again God hadn’t pulled a fast one on him, choreographing the whole thing to cause Nick to smash his head on the credenza. But of course, there was no hope of penetrating the inscrutable ways of God.

\*\*\*\*\*

Nick winced as he touched the bump on the back of his head. Damn! That hurt! But he had to admit the bandage around his head gave him a certain vaguely familiar look. Now who was it...

Nick dismissed the thought and turned his attention back to the lanky frame of Ralph, standing quietly in front of his desk. "Okay. You know the deal. You get the spare bedroom down the hall. Stay out of my way, don't make any waves, I keep my hands off you. You go back up there in four days, next Monday. Any questions?"

Ralph ran a hand through his full head of gray hair and replied in a firm voice. "Whatever. That's all fine. But, yeah, I do have a question. Any chance you got a spare TV somewhere? The Vikings are in the Super Bowl and..."

"Where the Hell do you think you are?" Nick's temper, never far from the surface erupted. "You think you're at a Holiday Inn? Hell no, you don't get a TV."

Ralph leaned over Nicodemus' desk and smiled at him. "No problem. Thought I'd ask. But hey, Nick, I've been looking around a bit, too. What kind of place you run here? Looks like you could use some fixin' up, a little patching and puttering, eh?"

Nick bristled again. He hated it when somebody told the truth. And he also wasn't used to people smiling Down Here. Plus for sure he had never had anybody - except God? - tell him he needed to fix his place up.

"Never you mind. Just do what I told you to do." Nick waved toward the door. "Now get outta here. I got work to do."

Nick watched in silence as Ralph uttered a cheery "Sure Nick!" and tossed a salute at him with a twinkle in his blue eyes before turning toward the door. But then

his temper instantly rose again as Ralph stopped at the red door and wiggled the loose doorknob back and forth a few times.

“Mighty hot down here, isn’t it feller, mighty hot,” said Ralph over his shoulder. “This temperature’s tough on things, and especially the hardware, mighty tough. Well, see you.”

And Ralph walked out the door which started to close behind him with a squeaking of oil-starved hinges.

Nick whirled around, snatched a can of Blatz Light out of the mini-bar, and fired it at Ralph’s back. But it was too late. The can smashed against the closed door and popped open, spraying beer all over his wallpaper.

\*\*\*\*\*

Nick whistled tunelessly as he returned to his office. The arrangements he’d made for O.J.’s imminent arrival pleased him enormously. Some hot times were on tap down here, some hot times indeed.

Nick paused with his hand on the doorknob. That was odd. The doorknob didn’t wiggle at all as he turned it. And furthermore, he could also hear someone else whistling from the other side of his red door, inside his office. What the Hell...

Nick ripped the door open and charged into his office. It was a mistake. His head snapped back as he smashed into the ladder behind the door, and he flew backwards. This time, as his still-aching head hit the floor, a blurry red curtain speckled with twinkling stars descended over his eyes. And through the curtain and stars he could dimly see..

Ralph staring down at him from atop the ladder, a roll of wallpaper in hand, and a concerned look on his face.

Nick lay on his back in stunned, painful silence as Ralph jumped off the ladder and leaned down over him. "Hey, sorry about that, Nick. Really am. Didn't realize you'd be back today, else I would've been more careful where I put the ladder. Here let me help you..."

Nick struggled to his feet by holding onto Ralph's arm and rubbed his eyes to clear them. What appeared before his eyes as the stars slowly faded shocked him. The peeling red-flock wallpaper on his office walls had vanished, replaced by new wallpaper of a robin's egg blue, embossed with yellow butterflies hovering around small purple flowers. Nick's mouth dropped open, but nothing came out. He was beyond words. And he didn't resist as Ralph led him to his desk and set him down in his chair.

Nick started slowly swiveling in the chair to face the front of the office - he noticed that the wheels no longer screeched - and opened his mouth to begin ripping into Ralph, when his eyes fell upon the spot where his Black Velvet Elvis used to hang. Used to. The portrait had also vanished, like his red wallpaper, to be replaced by a - Picasso? - painting of a chicken bent over looking at an egg on the ground in front of it.

"Where's Elvis?" gasped Nick, that being the best he could do given all the confused thoughts rattling around in his battered head. He stared at Ralph.

The confusion on Ralph's face now mirrored his own. "You mean you don't know either? Hmph! I always thought... Well, wasn't he supposed to show up Down Here? But if you..."

Nick waved his hand to shut up Ralph and pointed weakly toward the new picture on the wall.

Ralph turned around to look at it, and comprehension dawned on his face. He turned back to smile at Nick. "Oh, you mean the ugly thing that used to hang there? With all the stains on it? Yeah, I got rid of it. Didn't match your new wallpaper at all." Ralph nodded his head at Nick with a smile still on his face.

Nick's hand was still trembling in the air, still pointing. "What's that?"

"Well, to tell you the truth," - Nick winced - "not sure myself. I called up the Big Guy, and He had it shipped down from Up There. Said something about 'Chicken or Egg,' and that He'd never really figured it all out himself. Thought He'd let you get a try..."

Nick waved his hand to shut up Ralph again. "What're you doing? Here. To my office." And Nick spread both arms to indicate the new wallpaper.

"Well, had a little time on my hands, of course. Thought I might putter around a spell, help out. Got the door hinges and wheels on your chair oiled real quick, but I'm afraid the wallpaper took a bit longer than I figured. Sorry I didn't get that done sooner, but it is mighty hot down here, you know, and I had to work slower than I liked. Us Minnesotans don't really like the hot stuff..."

Nick shut up Ralph one more time. He stood up and pointed to the door. "Go. Just get outta here. Go. And take the ladder and all that crap with you. Go."

Ralph turned around, quickly gathered up his tools, and started out the door. But then one other question occurred to Nick. "Hey - what was that you were whistling when I came in here? Do I know that?"

Ralph paused at the door, and the usual smile popped back on his face. He pursed his lips and whistled a few bars.

"That?"

"Yeah. What is it?"

"You probably never heard it. The Vikings' Fight Song..."

Nick rolled his eyes in disgust and waved Ralph out the door. As the door closed behind Ralph - silently! - Nick sat back down at his desk and buried his face in his hands.

\*\*\*\*\*

The next morning, early, before Ralph could get to the office and start meddling, Nicodemus logged his PC into the thermostat settings menu for the environmental system controlling the temperatures Down Here. He looked at the current setting, scratched his head (being careful to avoid touching either his horns or the back of his head), twitched his tail, and cranked up the temperature ten degrees.

There! That'd fix Ralph and his dumb-ass inclinations to poke into things that weren't his business. Nick had promised God that he'd keep his hands off Ralph, to be

sure. Not that his promises were worth that much, of course, but the possibility of losing O.J. if he went back on his word was enough to keep him in line in this case.

But he'd obviously never said anything about the temperature control down here. And jacking the temperature up would keep that hyper-energetic Minnesotan lying low. Everybody knew they couldn't stand the heat, after all... A nice, neat solution.

Nick leaned back in his chair, put his hands behind his head, and a smile came over his face. As he let his eyes wander around the office, a small, vagrant thought somehow crept in, though. Damn! The office didn't look bad at all, with the new wallpaper. (A little better light from the window, might help, of course....) And he had to admit the issue of which came first - the chicken or the egg - had puzzled him too on occasion.

But the biggest thing, if he were forced to admit it, was that the damn chair and door didn't squeak anymore! If that wasn't a relief! However, that meant he had Ralph to thank, and...

Damn! It was too hard. Nick jumped up out of his chair and rushed out the door toward the O.J. area.

\*\*\*\*\*

When Nick returned, later that afternoon, he first paused with his hand on the doorknob. Nick put his head up against the door and listened. No, he couldn't detect any sounds emanating from the office, whistling or otherwise. But he opened the

door cautiously, just a crack, and peered inside. Silence - and bright light! - greeted him.

The light was coming in from outside, through sparkling windows. Windows which were framed by richly blue window curtains. And outside the windows, peering back at Nick from atop his ladder, stood the familiar lanky frame of Ralph. Ralph, in Vikings T-shirt and jeans, spray bottle and rags in hand.

Nick flew into the office and out the back door, ran up to the ladder and started shaking it. He looked up at Ralph with fire in his eyes. "Dammit! Now what! What're you up to now? Did God set you up to doing this? Why're you hounding me? What've I ever done to you?"

Ralph climbed down from the ladder, and clapped Nick on the shoulder. Hey Nick, take it easy. Don't mean any harm, really don't. But yesterday I didn't get a chance to finish off things in the office, so I put up the curtains while you were gone. And then these windows," Ralph pointed with his spray bottle, "Well, looked to me like they could use a bit of cleaning too, so I thought I'd do that while I was at it."

Ralph paused and wiped his face with a rag. "Kinda funny, though, I've gotta say. Never seen grease like that on windows before. You got any idea what that might be? A little tough to get off. Yessir, worked up a good sweat here, that I did"

Nick closed his eyes and leaned his head against the ladder, eyes closed, as Ralph spoke. This was getting to be more than he could bear. But he wasn't giving up! He sighed and turned back to Ralph. "Right. Work can make you sweat, can't it? I've never been fond of work, myself, as a policy. But isn't it too hot to doing that?"

“Ralph wiped his face again, and smiled. “Well, it is getting a tad warm, I have to admit. But you know, in Minnesota we’ve got this saying, ‘You don’t like the weather, wait a couple of hours. It’ll change.’ I’m okay.” And Ralph laughed and clapped Nick on the shoulder again.

“You damn right it’ll change!” muttered Nick as he wheeled away from Ralph toward his office and tripped over the hose that Ralph had stretched out to water the shrubs he had just planted under Nick’s picture window. This time, Nick didn’t see blurry curtains or twinkling stars. In fact, he didn’t see anything, because his face was buried in the mud from the water...

\*\*\*\*\*

After Nick crawled inside and wiped the mud out of his eyes, he cranked the temperature up another twenty degrees.

\*\*\*\*\*

The next morning, Nick again opened the door to his office gingerly, and peered inside before entering. Ralph was not to be found. Nick went over to his window, pulled aside the pretty blue curtains, and looked out back. And here too, no sight of Ralph. Nick smiled to himself in victory. He sat down at his desk, powered up his PC, and started reviewing the schedule of events for “Oh Yes! O.J.” as he had termed it.

But then, out of the corner of his eye, Nick caught a glimpse of motion in back, just tantalizingly and momentarily visible through his picture window. Nick whirled

around, and stared. Ralph drifted across his field of view, bare-chested, wearing shorts, carrying his ladder and some boards over his shoulder.

Nick stared in disbelief.

Ralph went past the window again, this time straining under the weight of a plywood panel. Sweat dripped down Ralph's face, and his gray hair was plastered in a wet mop to his head. But he was so intent on his task that he didn't even notice Nick. Ralph disappeared to the left side of the window.

Nick collapsed in his chair. He considered briefly going outside and doing something serious about the Ralph situation, but then thought better of it. He was clearly in a no-win thing here, and he could use his energies better for other things. Instead, he reached into his mini-bar for a Can of Blatz, and turned back to his PC and O.J. Nick never did find out exactly what Ralph was up to that day.

\*\*\*\*\*

*I must report to you that the next day was a cold day, a cold day of historical proportions. It surprised even Nick, who of course knew about these things. It was so cold that Nick, during the whole day in the office, never saw hide nor hair of Ralph. And in fact Ralph finally didn't do anything that day. He stayed in his room and shivered under the flimsy blanket on his bed.*

*That Sunday was a cold day in Hell indeed.*

\*\*\*\*\*

As he had done earlier, Ralph stood at ease in front of Nick's desk for his Exit Interview. And Nick had to confess that he had mixed emotions about things.

**“Okay - things are straight enough Up There now that it’s time to send you back. The Chief seems to have a way of keeping to his plans.”**

**Nick fell silent as he got up from his desk and stood looking out the picture window. He turned back to Ralph. “Um... Listen... Say.... Look. I guess I need to thank you for some of this stuff,” Nick waved his hand in slow circles, “you’ve done around here. I kind of like this new look. I’m not big on saying this kind of thing, of course, but...”**

**“You bet!” jumped in Ralph with a smile. “No problem. No problem at all. I enjoyed it, to tell you the truth. Kept my mind off things. Got to be a little warm here and there, of course, for a spell, but no big deal. I could handle it.”**

**For the first time ever in his eternal career, Nicodemus almost blushed. He managed to contain it. But then his thoughts started turning to his own handling of the Ralph thing, and it gave him pause. He’d have to think about that some more, sometime. Funny, how when you got mixed up with God, all kinds odd results seemed to creep in.**

**“How often does that happen?”**

**Nick realized that Ralph was asking him a question. “What now?”**

**“I was saying about the cold snap yesterday. That almost did me in. Never seen anything like it, even Up North. That sure was a cold day in Hell, if you’ll pardon my language. That happen often?”**

Nick went around to the front of his desk, put his arm around Ralph's shoulder, and started guiding him toward the door. "Yeah, I didn't give you a TV, either, so you wouldn't know would you?" Nick muttered almost to himself.

He stopped by the door, opened it, shook hands with Ralph. "Okay, my man," he said. "Back up you go. I've got that bigger fish on the way now. But yesterday? Yep. That was a cold day in Hell. But the fact is, I didn't have anything to do with that."

"Yesterday," and Nick paused a moment for the dramatic effect, "Your Vikings won the Super Bowl."

And he gave Ralph a gentle shove out the door.