

The Santas were out in full force at every mall, street corner, and pool hall in town, and it was only the first day after Thanksgiving. Maybe they loved cheering up the kids, maybe they wanted their checks, or maybe they were just bored, but there were many of them adorning every street in every town Sammy passed through. He smiled at them peacefully, but secretly wanted to talk to one of them. He had an awful lot on his mind.

Someone at the hospital where Peeps was recovering reported the added injuries to her body, and noted that Sammy hadn't been by to visit anymore. They called the police and, matching this evidence up with the wanted posters, called a nation-wide alert to this dangerous felon. He could almost cry. He was truly a fugitive of the law, though still not for actually committing a crime.

Finally, he gathered up the necessary courage to wait in line to get his picture taken with Santa. This particular Santa looked remarkably realistic, so Sammy swallowed his pride, nearly choking on it. He waited in line for several minutes, during which time he frightened two small children and a dog away. Finally, when he reached the head of the line, he went over and sat upon Santa's knee. Santa, not fazed at all, calmly asked, "Well what's your name young man?"

Sammy remembered his legal status, or rather his illegal status, and replied, "Julio."

There, Sammy sat immobile and silent for nearly an eternity. It would probably have been an eternity if, twenty seconds later, Santa hadn't asked, "What would you like for Christmas, then?"

Sammy spoke so distantly that Santa thought he was in another zip code. "Santa, do you have a minute?"

"Well," Santa answered, laughing in a jolly fashion, "I have lots of girls and boys here that—"

"Santa, I need your help."

Santa looked directly at Sammy. "Have you been naughty or nice this year, Julio?"

Sammy sighed. "That's just it, Santa. I've been really nice this year, in my estimation. I mean, all year. I haven't done anything... wait, well, I did steal some bars of soap from God, but aside from that—"

Santa was astonished. "You stole soap from the Church?"

"No, I stole it from Cain Baxter. But it was God's soap."

Santa scratched his beard. "I'm Santa Claus, Julio. I am in no way affiliated with the religious aspects of Christmas, and I am not sure—"

"That's not why I'm here, Santa!"

One of Santa's helpful elfin assistants walked up and informed Santa that many of the children were getting restless and that maybe Santa should hurry along. He told his busy assistant that he might need a little more time and maybe the other children should ride the merry-go-round once or twice and come back. The elfin assistant then did something very unlike the expected behavior of a happy elf and went back to her camera.

"Why are you here, Julio?"

Sammy was so immersed in recreating his tale in his mind that he forgot to talk quietly. "I trust that, if I tell you this, you won't tell anyone else, right Santa?"

Santa laughed again. "Of course not."

Sammy took a large breath. "Well, a while ago I did something not-at-all naughty, but when I had finished doing it, a few people thought I was a naughty person. Not many people, mind you, just a few. So I . . . well, I took a little vacation, Santa. I didn't want the people who thought I was naughty to find me, because they would probably have a whole lot of coal to put in my stocking. Do you understand, Santa?" Santa nodded reassuringly.

“Well,” continued Sammy in the same remorseful, monotonous voice with which he began, “then I went to visit a friend in the hospital which, I may add, is a very nice thing. You would agree?” Santa again nodded reassuringly. “Right. So when I visited this friend, let’s just say that she wasn’t feeling very well, and she wanted to do something very bad. So I tried to convince her not to be naughty. That’s good, right Santa?” Almost mechanically, Santa nodded reassuringly. “Okay, well, she went ahead and did the naughty thing and, in the process, ended up hurting herself really badly. Well, I didn’t want the hospital to find out she’d been naughty, so I put her back in her bed and left. Again, I don’t think I’ve been naughty in any of this.”

Santa’s elves began ushering the impatient, crying children to another Santa in the other wing of the mall.

“But you know what happened, Santa? The people at the hospital think *I* hurt my friend! And these people contacted the people who *already* thought I was naughty. And now there are many people who are angry at me following me and trying to rain on my parade. Santa, what should I do?”

Santa was beginning to feel like an ordained minister. “First, switch to my other leg. This one fell asleep.” Sammy moved over to the other leg. “Now Julio, if you’ve been as nice as you seem to claim, you shouldn’t have anything to worry about. After all, Christmas season is the time for giving and caring. If you truly want to be good, you will go back to the hospital and wait for your friend. Then you might want to donate to the hospital.”

Sammy sighed. “You don’t think I’m naughty, do you Santa?”

“Of course not Sammy. I... I mean, Julio. I think....”

Santa stopped mid-sentence. His Freudian slip was too noticeable to glide over. Sammy, too, stopped everything except breathing and staring at Santa. There was something very peculiar about this particular Santa, thought Sammy. With that short, white beard and that slightly stocky build, he *did* look uncannily like Santa Claus. But yet, there was an eerie familiarity about him. Those eyes. That smile. That voice. Maybe, just maybe....

“Who *are* you?” Sammy asked.

Before Santa could answer, a man in a Salvation Army outfit walked up to Santa and declared, with a bit too much enthusiasm, “Hey Bill, I got the case of brewskies for the big game tonight.”

Sammy sighed. I guess not, he thought. Santa immediately shushed him and sent him back from whence he came. Turning his attention back to Sammy, he said, “Sammy, you know what is right. Have a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.”

“Thank you very much, Santa.”

Sammy walked away, but he didn’t leave the mall for well over an hour. He sat on a bench and spent the majority of his time letting what Santa suggested simmer for a bit. Another reason he didn’t leave was that, frankly, he was a bit freaked out. There was something unusual about his encounter with Santa Claus, or rather, there was something unusual about that particular Santa Claus, and Sammy spent most of his time trying to decipher what it was that made this Santa different. He was so kind, so caring and yet, much to Sammy’s amazement, so familiar.

A bit hesitant about staying in one place for too long, Sammy finally departed and headed back to the hospital in which Peeps might still have been recovering. He wanted to apologize for his rash behavior. He wanted to be there for his friend. Most of all, he wanted to be on Santa’s “nice” list.