

SANITY CLAUS

Until the moment he shoved the gun into Santa Claus's back, Jerry thought his plan made perfect sense. He blamed that on the weather. It played tricks with his head.

Fall had been progressing normally in Chicago. Resplendent October dissolved into murky November. But then something went awry. December didn't cooperate right away. The first week was warmed by a hazy sunshine that made the days feel surreal. This reversal threw him. It put his mind in an unexpected place, made him forget who he was, where he was. It made him buoyant, in a way that most Midwesterners reserved for summer. He convinced himself that he knew what the hell he was doing, that things were going to work out.

But then real December arrived, and at zero hour of his plan, in the gloaming in that lonely park across the street from the shopping mall, when he crept up behind Santa and jabbed the gun between his shoulder blades, Jerry froze for an instant. He was unsure of what to say. How, exactly, did one accost a kindly old man wearing full Santa Claus regalia under his overcoat? For all of the time he spent viewing this scenario in his head the past few days, Jerry hadn't contemplated the words he would use.

What came out was "Hold it right there, fat man," and that was sufficient. Santa halted, hesitated for an instant, then

raised his hands away from his sides, dropping the briefcase he had been carrying. It hit the sidewalk with a thud.

At first, Jerry pressed the gun against Santa's back, but he pulled it away to hide the fact that his arm was trembling -- because of the frigid weather, he told himself. Jerry wore an army jacket. The jacket had seemed warm enough when he tried it on at the surplus store the day before, but maybe he had been too thrilled by how he looked -- uncharacteristically tough, maybe even a little scary for the first time in his life -- and hadn't paid enough attention to its practicality. Now, with Jerry's quickened breaths being turned into clouds of vapor, the jacket amounted to nothing more than a costume.

"OK, OK," Santa said. "Take it easy."

"Take it easy?" Jerry said. "Who put you in charge, old man?"

Jerry tried to sound authoritative as he marched in place, which he did not only to keep warm but to camouflage his shivering.

"I'm sorry," Santa said. "I'll give you whatever you want. I just don't want to be late for work, OK?"

"Yeah? Well, this time I'm calling the shots."

"This time?" Santa turned his head slightly, trying to get a look at Jerry.

Jerry was beginning to understand just how little he had thought this whole thing through. In his version of the plan,

this interaction wasn't going to last more than a few minutes, and it would be in the dark. It never occurred to him that he might need to cover his face to keep from being identified by his victim. It never occurred to him that there would be a "victim," per se. He didn't think of this as a crime. It was more of a prank.

"Do I know you from somewhere?" Santa asked.

"Don't play dumb with me." Jerry wasn't quite sure what he meant by that. It just sounded like something a guy with a gun might say.

"I'm being honest," Santa said. "Have we met?"

Leaning in toward Santa's ear, Jerry spoke in a kind of stage whisper, the way he thought a guy with a gun might speak. "My earliest memory. I'm like 3. We're at some store, I don't know where, maybe downtown. Out of nowhere, my dad picks me up and drops me in your lap. I'm petrified. I mean, look at you, man! I don't know you! I'm 3! You're scary as hell! Then you stick this candy cane in my face. I'm like, get that thing out of my face, man! You think some stupid candy cane makes you any less freaky to a 3-year-old kid?"

Santa considered the story. "But... that couldn't have been me. That was a long time ago. You must be, what, 35, 36?"

Jerry raised the gun and tapped it against the back of Santa's head. The old man inhaled sharply and shuddered.

"I'm 5. My mom and Mrs. Gruber take us all to Randhurst. They want some time to shop, so they dump us all on you. I don't want to go, but I have no choice. Do you hear me? I didn't want to go. I didn't want to sit on your creepy lap again!"

"OK, OK," said Santa, who was now shivering as well. "I get it."

But Jerry was on a roll. "You asked me what I wanted for Christmas. I said my Raggedy Andy needed new clothes. His pants were ripped. Can I get some new clothes for him. You know what you said?"

"I don't think I--"

"You said, 'Oh, we'll get you a new Raggedy Andy.'"

"Uh... OK. And... did you get it?"

"No!," Jerry said, grabbing Santa's shoulder to turn him around and look him in the eye. "No, I did not get a new Raggedy Andy!"

"I'm truly sorry about that. You should have gotten one."

"No! You still don't get it!" Jerry moved a few steps away, trying to collect himself.

"What?" Santa said. "I'm sorry. I don't understand."

Jerry wheeled around to face him. "I didn't ask you for a new Raggedy Andy! You didn't listen to me! I had a Raggedy Andy! I liked my Raggedy Andy! He just needed new clothes!"

"Look, you have to know that wasn't me. You have to know

that."

Jerry moved in a little closer. "Does it matter? Does it matter which one of you Bozos didn't understand me 30 years ago and which one didn't understand me 30 seconds ago? Even after I explained it to you?"

Santa opened his mouth as if to speak, but he had no answer. Jerry saw that as meaningful progress.

"How many times have you scared the crap out of some kid and then shoved a candy cane at him? Huh?"

"Oh, well... I don't think I shove them, exactly..."

"How many?"

In recent days, Jerry had lurked around the mall, observing Santa in action, hoping to gather some evidence of the jolly old elf inflicting misery on unsuspecting children through the use of sweets or other such nefarious means. He had failed to document even a single case.

But Santa took the bait. "Alright, yes. Maybe a few."

"Has it ever worked?"

"It, uh..." Santa measured his words. "Yes. It works. Sometimes."

"Ha! 'Sometimes!'" Jerry began to pace like a prosecutor badgering a witness. "What gives you the right? You don't know kids better than anybody else. Just because you got the beard, the stupid suit. You don't care, you don't listen..."

"OK," Santa said. "I'll admit it. You're right. Sometimes I probably don't listen as attentively as I should. Sometimes it's just a job. Look, what do you want? Money? Here..."

Santa dug into the pocket of his overcoat.

"You think this is about money?"

"I don't know," Santa said. "You're the one calling the shots, remember? Tell me what you want."

Jerry wiped his nose on his jacket sleeve and tried to focus. What did he want? What happened to his plan? He became aware of a vague but very present irritation in his head, not unlike last summer when he went to see the Cubs play. For the first few innings he felt unsettled and couldn't concentrate on the game, but he didn't know why. Finally he identified the source of the annoyance: that idiot sitting directly in back of him, yammering on about his job through the whole game. Having that constant, uninterruptible stimulus at such close range made it feel like a ferret was scrambling around in his skull. He felt like that now, but just like at the ballgame, he could tell that it had been there long before he was fully aware of it. But for how long? An hour? A few days? Maybe weeks. Maybe months. Maybe even years. He couldn't say for sure right then. And what was the source? Unable to focus on his plan, he grew more agitated. What did he want? He raised the gun and pointed it at Santa.

"I want you to remember every kid who got a candy cane shoved

in his face."

"OK," said Santa, eyeing the gun, which Jerry was wielding like an extension of his index finger. "I'll do it. I promise."

The response was too quick, too acquiescent for Jerry's liking. Santa was trying to pacify him, shoving a verbal candy cane into his face. Jerry's eyes were watering now -- from the cold, he assured himself. He wiped his nose again.

"I want you to think about every kid you didn't listen to. Every kid you treated like one more widget on an assembly line."

"I understand how painful that--"

"I want you to think about my girlfriend in college. You know what her job was?"

Santa's face went blank. "Um... no."

"She got hired out at Golf Mill one Christmas. Working as one of Santa's helpers."

"I see."

"Do ya? Do you know who she dumped me for? Do you know whose lap she was sitting on all those nights after work? Do ya?"

Santa sighed. "Oh, no."

"Oh, yeah."

"That's just... I'm really sorry. I can't even express... I mean, that's..."

"That's like some kind of serious breach of Santa Claus ethics, that's what that is. Don't you think?"

"I can't say I blame you for being so angry."

Santa ambled over to the bench and sat down. It occurred to Jerry that Santa was taking liberties here. What was the proper protocol for this sort of thing during a stick-up? Should he make him continue to stand? Being the guy with the gun required more decision-making than he would have guessed.

"It gets better," Jerry said. "I got laid off in October."

"Oh, that's terrible. I'm really sorry."

Now Santa sounded sincere, which annoyed Jerry further. Being patronized was one thing; he could respond to that easily enough with contempt. Actual sympathy made him uncomfortable in a way that he didn't know how to counteract.

"A few weeks ago I came over to the mall," Jerry said. "Tried to find a job. Anything. Seasonal, part-time. Anything. What do they got, like 40 stores in there? Nothing. Nobody'd hire me. Finally one guy tells me he thinks the girl in the mall office is looking for somebody to be Santa Claus."

"You can't be serious."

"What was I supposed to do? I need a job."

"As Santa Claus? That's a terrible idea."

Jerry moved in front of the bench and leaned in toward Santa. "A background check? A personality test? Just to put on a fake beard and have my picture taken all day? Did you have to go through all that?"

"Well, no," Santa said. "But I've been doing this for a while. I have references."

"Turns out, I don't have the 'optimal temperament' to be a Santa Claus."

"That could not possibly have come as a surprise to you, could it?"

"So you got the job," Jerry said, tapping the gun on the front of Santa's shoulder as he spoke. "And I got nothing."

"There must be something. Have you filed for unemployment?"

Now Jerry plopped down on the bench alongside Santa, who stared straight ahead, even as Jerry moved in almost close enough to touch his nose to the side of the old man's beard. He went back into his stage whisper. "I been watching you. Ever since Thanksgiving, I been watching you."

"I see." Santa did not stir.

"And I figured out what I want for Christmas. You know what I want?"

"What?"

"I want the suit."

Santa turned to look Jerry in the eye. "A suit?"

"No! See? You don't listen." Jerry jumped to his feet again. "I want the suit," he said, poking the gun toward Santa's torso.

"I want that suit."

Santa's hands, in their white gloves, went straight to his

chest. "I... I can't. It's rented."

"Take it off," Jerry said.

"Why? What do you want with a Santa suit?"

Jerry snickered. "Sorry, folks. No Santa tonight. No Santa to scare your kids. To steal their girlfriends. To screw with their heads."

"What good will that do? That won't hurt me."

"Oh, no? What if they fire your ass?"

"What if they do? They'll just hire somebody else. Will you steal his suit too?"

With the gun still trained on Santa, Jerry stood motionless. "We're done talking."

"Kids are waiting to see Santa. All you'll be doing is hurting them, just like you were hurt when you were a kid."

"I don't care."

Santa gazed up at Jerry. "I think you do."

"You don't know anything about me."

"I know you're here, trying to pull off a stunt like this."

"Give me the suit," Jerry said.

"No," Santa said. "Sit back down for a minute. Let's just talk for a while."

"Talk? No! Quit stalling."

Santa grinned. "Did you ever get new clothes for that Raggedy Andy?"

"What do you care? Stop talking and take off the damn suit."

"You still have that Raggedy Andy, don't you?"

Jerry wiped his nose on his sleeve again. "Stop talking!"

Santa rose from the bench, walked to his briefcase, and picked it up.

"What are you doing?" Jerry asked.

"I'm leaving," Santa said, inspecting the briefcase for damage. "This is a waste of time."

"Get back here and sit down."

Santa shook his head. "What's the point? You're not even willing to make an effort." He turned and began to walk away.

Jerry followed, violently pointing the gun straight at him, as if the rigidity of his arm would make the weapon even more threatening. "Hey! You want to walk away alive? Get back here and give me that suit."

Santa stopped and turned to face the gun without an inkling of fear. "Please don't embarrass yourself any more than you already have. I know that thing's a toy."

A rush of blood warmed Jerry's cheeks and forehead. His arm weakened. Fighting the urge to turn and run, he stared at Santa's chest. "What if you're wrong?" he said.

Santa appeared to have something to say, but he chose to remain silent, instead giving Jerry a look -- something between a smile and a grimace -- before he turned and began to walk

again.

Jerry's gun arm dropped to his side. As he watched Santa, and his plan, slip away, he cursed the man in the surplus store who claimed that even the police couldn't tell the gun was fake. He cursed himself for being foolish enough to believe it. He yelled after Santa. "How did you know?"

Over his shoulder, Santa shouted, "I'm Santa Claus!"

Jerry let that response soak in. He knew that under different circumstances he would have thought it was funny.

Dissatisfaction gnawed at him, and it drove him to do the only thing left that made any sense. "Wait!" he shouted. "Don't go."

Laboriously, as if reluctant to lose the momentum he had built, Santa stopped and turned to look back. Jerry waited for him to speak, but Santa only stared at him.

"Please," Jerry finally said. "Come and sit down again."

"Why should I?"

"I'll talk. Please. Just..." He motioned toward the bench with the gun, prompting a reproachful look from Santa that caused Jerry to quickly stash the gun in his jacket pocket. Then he held his hands up, palms forward. Santa gave his head a barely perceptible shake and then started walking back. Without a word he brushed past Jerry, went to the bench, and took a seat. Jerry followed but stopped a few feet shy of the bench. He wanted to be insulted by the stern look Santa was giving him, but he

couldn't find the energy for it.

"What's your name?" Santa asked, and as he did, the look on his face softened.

Jerry pondered his own shoes as he mumbled his name.

Santa leaned forward a bit. "I'm sorry?"

"Jerry," he said, a little too loudly this time. "My name's Jerry."

"Jerry," Santa said, as if to file it away in his memory.

"Nice to meet you, Jerry. Come on over." Santa patted his knee. Jerry tried to make sense of that.

"You... You want me to...?"

Santa shrugged his shoulders. "Why not?"

Somewhere in his head he had a million answers to that, but the best he could muster was "I'm too old for that."

"You don't look too old to me," Santa said.

As he stood shivering, Jerry could feel his heart pound. With his eyes fixed on Santa, his field of vision seemed to narrow, as if he were viewing him through a paper towel roll. All other sights and sounds and smells of the world fell away. After what seemed like a long time under this hypnosis, he took a few steps toward the bench, and he turned stiffly, approaching the old man's lap the way he might approach a shaky ladder from a high roof. He backed away.

"I can't," he said. "It's too weird."

Santa chuckled. "You know what's weird, Jerry? Ordering Santa Claus to strip naked at gunpoint. That's weird. This is normal compared to that."

Jerry tried to suppress a smile, but he failed. He glanced self-consciously around the park and then laughed at himself for doing so; there wasn't a soul in sight. He shuffled his feet into position, grasped Santa's shoulder, and lowered himself onto his knee. Jerry felt Santa's hand land carefully between his shoulder blades. They had both stopped shivering. The weirdest thing, Jerry thought, was that this felt so natural.

"Now what?" Jerry asked, staring down at the ground.

Santa reached into a pocket and pulled out a candy cane. He held it up, keeping it a respectful distance from Jerry's face, and silently offered it to him. Jerry turned and looked into the old man's eyes, scanning for anything resembling insincerity or malice, but he found none. He reached out and took the candy cane.

Santa smiled. "Merry Christmas, Jerry."