

Two Men Walked Into A Bar

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Two men walked into a crowded bar. A flurry of snowflakes followed on that December evening. By shuffling steps, each man meandered toward the bar. Heads swiveled at the oddly dressed newcomers. One wore warm winter clothes and a furry hat; the other's bland summery clothes seemed inadequate. Both had beards, one white, the other dark. Some would've called these two men 'eye-catching.'

They parked themselves at a spot along the wide polished wood bar. Elbows anchored their weight. Feet found the brass railing near the floor; one boot and one sandal see-sawed. Each man glanced at the other with amusement and chuckled. Then at the same moment they said, "You're *really* dressed like that!" This wasn't a question. Grins shifted, curiosity took over their expressions. Yet, no other words accompanied the raised eyebrows.

The bartender asked what they wanted to drink. One finger rose. "A pint." A glass, dark with Guinness, soon met his hand.

The other fellow caught the bartender's eye and pointed to the Guinness. "Same!" That got a nod, and a glass slid his way. Lips plunged through the tan foamy head, and each took a strong sip. Both said, "Ahh, now that's good."

The light-clothed man unwound a narrow leather band to undo his ponytail and then shook his icy, wet hair free.

The white-bearded man turned to take in the noisy drinkers and tried to tune out the bleating Christmas music overhead. "I just got off work."

"What do you do...dressed like that?"

The man's hand went to the bottom of his large white beard and like a magic trick he pulled it down and let it spring back. Tilting his head, he winked, "Get it, chum? Holidays-schmol-ee-daze! I'm already sick of the non-stop holiday tunes—fah-lah-lah-lah and blah-blah-blah. North Pole, my ass. Employers and snowmen. Somebody stop this glittering tinsel insanity, please!" The little bell on the end of his cone-shaped, floppy cap, jingled as Santa's agitation rose.

Amused, his impromptu companion lightly tugged on the white beard once or twice. "Fun. So, you wear a fake beard; part of your job? What of these bright red clothes, black belt and dangling cap? You're hired to bring laughter and festivities to celebrations. If so, that's really fine work, I'd say, hard, but fine indeed. You're a special man, my friend."

Santa asked his companion, looking him in the eye, "And you? Your robe? Sandals? No coat, hat, or gloves in this weather! Not even socks! I like the scarf, though. I bet you need somethin' hot to

slurp down and warm you up? Did yah just get off the bus? Where yah from, down south where it's warm?"

The grin left the robed man and a serious face took hold. He peered down, squaring up his scarf making the white and blue fringes even—like he'd done countless times before. "Yes. Yes, where do I come from? Hmm."

His new pal interrupted, "By the way, I got this round—you buy the next." He clinked the other's glass. "That time of year again, y'know. Love your neighbor. Do unto others and all that crap. Who dreamed all that up?" He shook his head.

The robed man stared. "Crap? That word has a certain finite solidity. Crap. A good word when rightly used."

Santa replied, "Yeah. There's too much crap in our little world. This season of the year is supposed to usher in a temporary blissful kinda spirit—which abruptly ends on January One. We are to forgive, forget, and go out of our way for all the slobs n' idiots. Any ol' idiot, whatever way, shape, or form." He sipped his beer. "Tell me, my stranger, isn't this just a wrong marriage of religion and credit cards? A romance that was never meant to be?" He groaned. "Oh! Wait! Wait! I'm doing my annual griping too soon. I haven't even finished off one brewski. I can and do go on; let me tell yah. Sorry man. Maybe you're into all of this holiday cheer stuff."

The companion sipped and spoke. "You asked what I do and where I'm from. Fair 'nough."

Just then, a man slammed between the two of them into the bar, jostling them and their glasses. The man was gripping a longneck and his breath was a head turner. He spread his arms wide to embrace his two victims. In an obnoxious, expressive voice he sputtered, "Hey Santa, am I glad to see you! Hot damn. I got only one thing on my Good Boy wish list, and it's a humdinger."

Both prisoners stared at the intruder waiting for this "wish" and interruption to end.

"Alright, here it goes Gramps...ahh, I mean Santa, sir." He pointed one finger and lifted it proclaiming, "One chick! Blonde. I like 'em with long blond hair, down near their butt—gotta have a kick-ass butt, too. Sexy, man. Sexy, of course." He let go of the two men and stepped backward. Putting both upright hands near his chest, he bought them outward looking at the distance to get them even. Beaming, he whooped, "BIG! Big ones! Gotta have 'em, Santa. I know you can do it. Not too much to ask. Okay dude? And Santa, kiss them reindeer for me. I seen 'em flyin' once when I was a kid out my bedroom window—never forgot."

The man backed away making a half-bowing gesture, beer still in hand. He stopped and looked at the odd man next to Santa. He spoke emphatically, "Hey you, buddy! I don't know who you are, but you look so cool. Damn, you are one cool dude!" He turned and was lost in the clinking, bouncing, shuffling, shouting crowd of partiers.

"I haven't been labeled 'Buddy' for some time." He sipped at his beer. "So, you grant people their wishes." He smiled. "One blonde comin' up! Nice job; must pay well."

“Yeah, right. A snowflake above minimum wage, that’s all.” A huff followed. “And you?”

“I make things...changes; help people; order out of disorder. I’m in demand.” He looked at his dwindling beer, and then dead ahead into the spacious mirror behind an array of colorful liquor bottles. Transfixed, he went silent.

Annoyance brewed in Santa, and he stared at his beer. Long seconds passed. A grunt repeated from his throat, “Ahh, well. But, tell me, Señor, what is it that you do specifically—that is, unless you don’t want to go there?”

As if explaining himself to himself, he softly said. “Mostly remodeling. I suppose.”

“Construction game, eh?”

“Yes. Remodeling, construction, that is if people really want it and will make the changes which...which...well, that needs sincere discussions. Some people can’t make up their minds until it’s too late and I’ve already moved on.” His eyes remain focused on the mirror in front of him. His fingers started slowly spinning his glass of stout.

Santa nodded. “Well, sure. That’s biz, ain’t it? Knock down some walls, rip up the foundation, fresh choices of materials, paint—whatever is in the budget. I get it.”

The robed man countered, “What you say is right, but also wrong.” Passive eyes continued roving over the hundred shining bottles of booze ahead of him.

His companion looked hurt, as if he was scratching his head without doing so. “Huh?”

“By the way, I’m more of a wine-man myself; part of my upbringing. I even tried making a batch once. Everyone liked it.”

Santa’s eyes gleamed. “Home brew?”

“Sort of.” He set his empty glass down. “You could say I made it in God’s Country—that helped. My father got me into that and other crowd-pleasers, but my mother pushed me to give the wine a shot. Yeah, my father taught me the biz...and then some.”

The bartender swooped away one empty and saw a shake of the head meaning no more.

The robed man turned to Santa and asked in a dead-pan, “You ever been naked and really know it?”

Santa drew back, eyes squinting. “Excuse me?” He took off his sweaty, cone-shaped, floppy red cap with the little bell jingling. A mop of pure white hair came off too, revealing baldness defined by a semi-circle of short brown hair.

The one with the real beard stared at the man in the silly costume before replying. “There’s a nakedness all people fear and eventually feel. Some survive, some weaken and die. Insecurity, waywardness; some kill to have what they want, or what they don’t want. When we’re alone at home

with our clothes on, we're still clothed with an unwanted, inner, vulnerable self. We think we know ourselves. But, no one can, not fully, unless someone else thoroughly knows us, and has listened and watched us. You might say bridges of trust from them to us ...sturdy, respectable spans. My father and I have this trust." When he said 'spans' he put his hands close together and moved them wider apart.

Santa replied, "That's good you have that, that thing you're talkin' about. My old man died years ago—never had somethin' like that goin' on." He grinned, and his mind went adrift to islands of memories for a few moments.

Then the robed man, once again held the other's attention, said in a banker's voice: cordial, but authoritative. "Yes. Well, my father is still alive. You could say he always is. But myself...not so much...I did die. To many, I am dead, still dead." He paused in thought. "But it didn't go down that way."

Perplexed, Santa let drop, "I don't know what the hell to say to you, Bud." The beat went on overhead, *Walking in a winter wonderland*. Time clicked by. "You say you were dead? Like one of those near-death experiences, huh? I've seen them folks on TV. Quite the story they tell; long tunnel, white light, God or somebody who chats with you."

"Er...that's *my* father."

A mumble of "Ohh, yeah. I should've guessed that" came out of Santa. He asked with a slight sneer, "Just when did you say you died, friend?"

"Didn't." He looked like it was his turn at moving a chess piece. "What's this year, Santa?" He heard the date. "Let's just round it off at 2,000 years ago. No point in mathematical details."

Santa saw a confident, friendly face, but was lost. "And how long were you dead?"

"Oh, roughly three days, but in the real-meal-deal time, no one is ever dead, only their beer-drinking body goes lifeless. Death finds everyone. I slipped through those fingers and made it back."

Caught with disgust and disbelief, Santa said, "You're that old, huh? Oh, so you're Jesus f'n Christ! Oh, you got to be kidding! That's who I'm havin' a brewski with, Jesus himself? What luck." He raised his voice and his beer. "Merry Christmas everyone!" No one noticed.

At that moment, the drunken man staggered back to the bar railing. He leaned on their shoulders and forced himself between them again. A tall blonde, showing a lot of skin and curves, was in the grip of one hand. His other hand grasped a fresh beer bottle. With slurred speech he emphatically said, "Louk Santa! Wot a babe, huh! I flound my hot babe, magik, man! Whoo-hoo!" He swung the woman around in a circle to show her off.

Santa paused from the look-see and turned to his drinking buddy. But no one was there. A feeling like electricity went through his body. "Hey! Did—did—you, dude—did you see where he went? That guy with the shaggy hair and beard?"

The drunk was singing, "Ruu-doll-fh that red knows rayn ning dearrrrr!" He stopped and positioned an ear to the questioner. Expecting to hear a secret, in a quieter, sincere tone he quickly asked, "Wot's that man?" Then he abruptly fell to the floor leaving the giggling blonde upright; however the beer bottle spun away. He stretched an arm up. "Hey, bro, give me ah han bak hup ther!"

Santa lowered his hand to the drunk and yanked. The he swiveled and looked toward the front door and then to the men's restroom and soon gave up searching the bobbing heads in the crowd. On the shiny bar he eyed a stack made of the robe—neatly folded, two sandals, a strand of leather and the blue and white striped fringed scarf. He exclaimed, "Was that a shawl, or a prayer thingy? I was drinkin' a beer with Jesus f'...ahh, I mean Mister Jesus Christ, himself! Nah. Gone man, now he's gone. Weird and disappeared. Well, I'll be god dam—ahh...I'll be a God-smacked. And hey, I bought him a beer. He'll remember me—owes me one. And me? I gotta get outa here and think this through." Dazed, he mumbled, "The guy drinks stout, but prefers wine...okay." He turned back to the bar one last time.

Standing next to Santa, dressed and smiling was Jesus.

Eyeing the man in red, Jesus questioned, "Didn't think I'd forgotten that next round, did you Santa?"

Shaking, Santa put a hand on the other's shoulder. "Man, you and me, we gotta talk."