

The Elevator Man

Of all the Christmases this man has seen come and go, the one that will forever stand out in my mind is the one on which I decided to move back home. Decided. No, that's not the right word. Decided, implies that I made a choice. It wasn't a choice. It was a last resort.

Growing up in Cedar Falls wasn't a bad thing, mind you. It seemed like such a simple time and simple place, but I always knew that I was destined for bigger and better things. I worked hard to get those things, too. From the top of my high school class, it was on to an ivy league college. Upon graduation I had a position waiting for me at a top-notch company on the west coast. I married my high school sweetheart. We had two children, a girl and a boy.

Things were going great. One promotion followed another. We moved from one luxurious home to a larger one. Cars, boats, RV's, summer cottages on the ocean, we had it all. A young couple living the American dream. It was a dream all right. One day we were abruptly awakened from it.

It seems the top-notch company I worked for was knocked down a few notches. Amidst questions of fraud and scandal it closed its doors. In one day, I went from the innovative young executive to just another man looking for a job. Although totally innocent and not at all suspect in the company's questionable collapse, its name listed on a resume did not give the impression of one being gold bond. I quickly learned the meaning of living beyond one's means. One by one each luxury was sold, towed or returned. Our friends disappeared as quickly as our possessions.

Then I remembered that simpler time and simpler place. Since having left Cedar Falls, I kept in touch with my childhood neighbor and lifelong friend, Bob Chamberlain. Bearing in mind that Christmas letters and long distance conversations were somewhat of a platform for me to brag on how well I was doing, I didn't much want to tell Bob what I was going through, but Bob like everyone else in the country heard about the company's upheaval. He was much smarter than I ever gave him credit for, and a true friend. He read in between the lines of what I was going through and offered me a job and secured an apartment for my family. It wasn't much, a low paying job that he probably would have hired a kid out of high school to do. Let's face it, it was charity but the thought of going home, starting fresh, didn't sound bad. And for that matter what else could I do? I took my friend up on his kind offer.

I packed my wife and kids and what we had left in a used Ford van. Not the kind of style we were accustomed to traveling in, but that was just one of many changes. Typical for December, as we traveled east the temperature got lower and the snow got deeper. We discovered the van's heater didn't work.

Finally, we reached Cedar Falls. In the business district, giant Christmas lights were strung from the lamp posts. I remembered them as being brighter from my childhood. The nativity set was on display in the same place in front of City Hall, but it didn't seem nearly as big. I didn't know what feelings to expect when I returned home, but they weren't feelings of excitement. It was more of an awkwardness. So many things were the same, yet seemed different.

When we pulled in that evening Bob was waiting for us. His wife had a roast beef dinner prepared for our arrival. It sure tasted better than the peanut butter or bologna sandwiches we had been traveling on. After eating and about an hour of reminiscing Bob took us to the apartment near downtown. We parked on the street and climbed the stairs to the second floor and opened the door that said 2B. It was quite small but very neat and clean.

Bob told us goodnight and left. My wife put the kids to bed as I looked around and learned what a good friend Bob was. The refrigerator was full of food. In the corner stood a trimmed Christmas tree with a few presents for the children under it.

Yes, just a week until Christmas and there I was scarcely able to feed my family, let alone provide a decent Christmas for them. I felt like a failure. Not that they complained, but it hurt me seeing what I had put them through. I worked for Bob, and I worked hard. The pay wasn't much, but it would cover the cost of the apartment and food, until I got on my feet.

Bob paid me Christmas Eve and we knocked off early. I first paid the rent and took what little remained downtown to Willard's Department Store to buy Christmas gifts. On my way I remembered as a boy how exciting it was to go to Willard's Department Store to see the elevator man. I never knew his name. Everyone just knew him as the elevator man. I recalled how the carved wooden door would slide open and there he stood with a crisp blue uniform and his hat trimmed in gold. His black eyebrows were as bushy as his big mustache, and his grin always went from ear to ear. His voice would ring out in sing-song fashion. "First floor, Ladies Wear. Skirts, dresses and bows for your hair. Second floor, Housewares, cookbooks, dishes, pots and pans. Everything you need, to catch a man." His voice chimed rhymes at every floor. Without fail someone would ask "How's life treating you?" He'd nod his head and say "Oh it has its ups and

downs." I heard him say it dozens of times and every time it was funny. Everyone thought so, no matter how many times they'd heard it. No one could keep a straight face when the elevator man said life has its ups and downs, pulled back the handle to close the door and take us to the next level.

I would always ask him what time it was. As he pulled the gold pocket watch from his vest pocket, he would always say, "Let's see what my watch says," and bringing it to his ear say, "Tick, tock. Tick tock," chuckle, then announce the time.

When I got to the elevator, I was disappointed when the new shiny chrome doors opened to only lighted buttons and last-minute shoppers. I spent most of the money for gifts for my wife and children and headed home. This used to be a wonderful place I thought to myself, but nothing seems the same. Why it's not even like Christmas shopping without seeing the elevator man. Thomas Wolfe was right when he penned the words "You can't go home again".

In my mind I reproved myself. "You're a grown man. Times change. Feeling sorry for yourself because of your job and a tiny apartment is enough, but just because you didn't see the elevator man? After all it's been so long ago, he may not even still be alive."

After that short lecture, mentally I began giving myself a pep talk. After all, it was Christmas eve, and I had two children at home. As I took a shortcut across the park, I was trying to muster up some of that Christmas spirit we hear so much about when I heard a voice. "Fourth floor, Toy department. Army Men, jacks, balls and kites. Dolls that cry, stuffed dogs that bite."

The voice sounded shakier and somewhat gruffer, but I recognized it. It was him. I looked around and there he was sitting on a park bench throwing crumbs as well as his rhymes to the pigeons. He wasn't dressed in his starched blue suit, but rather a stained olive drab jacket that was well-worn and his gray hair stuck out around the dirty toboggan cap on his head. His gray mustache held a collection of dirt and crumbs. He wore denim pants that had holes revealing another pair under them and his boots didn't match.

I knew he wouldn't remember me, and owing to his appearance I wondered how much of anything he was aware of, but he had given me so much joy as a child, I had to stop and speak to him. I walked over to the bench and said, "How's life treating you?"

There was that grin from ear to ear. Only now it didn't contain as many teeth as it used to. He nodded and said, "Oh, it has its ups and downs."

Wanting to know what had happened to him, but too embarrassed to ask, I clumsily said "So you're not working at Willard's Department Store anymore?"

He looked me in the eye. "You want to know what happened to the elevator man?"

"I would," I answered.

"Well, you see Son, life does have its ups and downs. They call it progress. Decided they could do without an old man like me. Put in a new-fangled elevator with fancy buttons. Sent me home. Seems everybody got automated, and nobody needed the elevator man. For me things just got worse. My only boy was killed by a drunk driver. My wife died three months later. Doctors say her heart just stopped. I guess that's because it got broke so bad when my boy died."

As he told me his story, he stopped several times throwing the birds crumbs and singing out some rhymes and then continued on. "I didn't care much about anything after that, living, dying, anything. I lost everything I had. But just when everything was at its lowest, I found a treasure. Yep, life does have its ups and downs."

A year ago I would have laughed him to scorn when he said he had a treasure, but recognizing how close I could be to his situation, I just nodded thinking it may comfort this poor soul to think he found a treasure. There was no harm in such delusions. It was obvious the streets were home to this man.

The wind was blowing, and large snowflakes began to fall. It was Christmas Eve. "Will you come and eat dinner with us?" I asked.

His eyes lit up, but he was apprehensive. He looked down at his clothes. "Oh, I couldn't do that."

"Come on," I said. "It's Christmas Eve. I won't take no for an answer."

He got up and pushed his shopping cart as I pulled across the snow-covered park. I thought to myself, "What am I doing?" Sure, this may be some whimsical sentimental moment for me reaching back into my childhood to the elevator man, but not to my wife. To my wife he was just a bum. How could I justify bringing this man into our home with two small children? I could tell as I spoke with him, he wasn't, how shall we say, normal. After insisting, I couldn't now ask him not to come.

"It's Christmas Eve," I stuttered, "Are you sure you don't have some place you'd rather be? Somebody that will miss you?"

"Nowhere. Just so happens I checked my engagement calendar just before you walked up. I'm completely free. You caught me on a good night," he smiled.

Great, I thought to myself. I'm not just taking home a bum; I'm taking home a bum with a sense of humor. My wife was not going to be happy, but I thought we'll give him a quick meal and send him on his way. On his way? On his way where? He's homeless. Where is he going to go? I'm giving him a meal and then sending him back out in the snow and cold. No wonder no one wants to get involved. It's not easy. Maybe I could just give him a few bucks for a meal and send him on his way. No, I couldn't do that. I spent the last of my money on the packages I was carrying home.

When we got to the apartment, I thought about the shopping cart. We couldn't carry it upstairs. I couldn't let him leave it in front of the building. What about the neighbors? What would the landlord think? "We'll push this around back. It will be safe there," I said.

"Ah, it'll be all right here," he answered.

"No." I insisted. "I wouldn't want anything to happen to it. We'll just put it around back."

My wife of course, was surprised to meet our dinner guest, but was quite gracious when I introduced him as the elevator man. She asked to take his coat, but he kept it on. The children stared but remained quiet throughout the meal. He ate like he had not eaten a homemade meal for some time and filled up in case it would be some time before he had another.

After we finished eating, he said, "You've been so kind to me. Let me share my treasure with you."

Certain that there was no treasure I quickly said "You don't owe us anything. Don't worry about it."

He reached inside his coat and pulled from it a tattered bible. "You see," he said, "I used to think life was about what you make of yourself and what you have. Even as an adult I thought Christmas was about gifts, the things you could buy for your wife and kids. But one day I found the treasure. See, I realized Christmas is about a gift. Not one you can buy and wrap and put under a tree. It's a gift from God. One day I realized it doesn't matter how well I think I've done or what I've got. These things are just temporary. Truth is no matter how well I think I've done the bible says every man falls short. Even though we fall short God loves us so much, He wants us to be with Him in heaven. That's why that first Christmas, Jesus came as a baby. He lived a perfect life and died on the cross taking the punishment for our sins so when this life is over, we can have a home in heaven. It's God's gift to us. We just need to accept it. This treasure is eternal life."

I had seen nativity scenes and heard the account of the first Christmas many times before, but something happened at that moment. I knew that God loved me. He did it for me.

At that table my wife, my children and I all bowed our heads and thanked God for that gift. That treasure. We asked Jesus to forgive us and thanked Him for shedding His blood for us.

When we looked up the elevator man was gone. I went down the stairs and to the back of the building. The shopping cart was gone, but there were no tracks in the freshly fallen snow. There was no sign of him. I walked back into the apartment. "He's gone," I said.

On the table lay the tattered bible and on it, a gold pocket watch. Engraved on the back was the scripture reference, Matthew 25:34-40. I picked up the bible and fumbled through it until I found the verses indicated on the watch and read aloud to my family.

"Then shall the King (Jesus) say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

Yes, life has its ups and downs, but thanks to the elevator man through it all I'm now standing on solid ground.

This Christmas let's stay focused on the true reason of this joyous celebration. We are remembering the birth of the Savior. Jesus was born as the babe in the manger. He grew up to be a perfect man, and suffered and died on the cross taking the punishment for our sins. Because of His sacrifice we can have a home in heaven when this life is over. We need to accept this gift of salvation and follow Jesus.

There is no greater treasure a person can have than to know Jesus and claim Him as Savior. Remember He is just a prayer away.