

A Place to Be on a Cold December Day

By Gerald Morton



I suspect this non-fictional story has an unusual title for a traditional Christmas story, but then, G. (abbreviation for the sake of confidentiality) is as unlikely a central character as may be found. He's a little out of step with both season and society and a little out of sorts with himself. Also there's an air of disquiet going around regarding the unsettling question of the city - its current instability and its uncertain future status.

This story has its beginnings in the aftermath of the infamous "Federal Liberal Oil Stabilisation Plan" which sent the provincial economy into cardiac arrest. In turn the city's stable finances stuttered, stalled, then slammed into a wall. Those homeowners with mortgages at high interest rates retrenched. There were layoffs, cutbacks and closures. Company loyalty built brick by brick in the good years, got lost in the mix back then...these were the times when it paid to be "connected". We had a ten-dollar word for it back then. We called it "networking". If you weren't networking you couldn't get on to the interview list or get a place in the line up even for minimum wage work.

For the first time in fifty years we had food banks, food drives, a soup kitchen and a homeless shelter. Perhaps the most illustrative feature symbolic of the times was the unheralded appearance in the downtown area of highly organised professional street beggars, well versed in their sales pitch and proficient at their trade. Given the times most churches to their credit opened their wallets, unbuttoned their collars, rolled up their sleeves, and jumped into the affray - lean times indeed. Typically our parishioners who gathered after Mass for coffee were visibly affected. They would relate stories about "back when", the "hard times", no welfare then, and no free lunch. They had to "pull themselves up by the bootstrap". I suppose the "they" was a reference in the third person to the men of the depression era relegated to the status of strangers, of someone's neighbour or a distant relative - always someone else looking for work, riding the rails, sleeping in the river bottom, huddling in doorways. For the most part back when, folks gave to the needy, open handed. Some say folks today are hardnosed on these things. I don't think so.

Against this backdrop I met G. for the first time at my office in the church. I wasn't real sure what brought G. to our door - perhaps it was just a place to be on a cold December day. However, it was not a moment too soon for us or one too late for him. Even now it's difficult to forget his dramatic pantomime entrance into my office. It seemed to me he attempted to bully his way through the door with his shoulders and feet, not unlike a belligerent drunk looking for a fight. He entered my office as if pursued by and in expectation of encountering an assailant. He stomped rather than stepped in. He gave no eye contact, his gaze content to view the floor, his head down, raising it more than once in the direction of the door, almost anticipating a visitor.

G. was a man of middle age and height. In-tow, a great heaviness followed him and was about and around him. It seemed reasonable to believe his life of late was one of hard knocks, closed doors and burnt bridges, all aiding and abetting in the illusion of his premature aging, so evident in his facial contours, grimed and stubbled. His face was ruined and carried the tales line by line, of lost virtue and

time squandered, a feature in those who shelter where fate decrees. Increasingly I judged him ugly, the effects of an ugly life, manifest... seemingly choosing to wear his ugliness like war wounds. A lingering and uncomplimentary combination of odours, which he seemed both impervious to and oblivious of, preceded him. His much abused gently used clothing exuded a toxic blend of dry sweat with a rank staleness of barroom second hand tobacco smoke which cried forlornly in their way for rending. Equally, there was the tell-tale lingering scent, an unmistakable pungency like Lysol and cheap aftershave mixed, the trade-mark of those who have done time - street time, goal time, drunk tank time. A blind man could see that G. was a drowning man - washed up, washed ashore, washed out, the outcome for those who sailed too close to the wind - now beached, rudderless and without canvas, apparently discarded by man, forgotten by God.

But there he was in my office out of the cold December day, out of options. To the naked eye he was precariously perched on the oldest, loneliest, darkest and lowest perch of life. When he spoke it was from deep within this well, his name too mumbled to catch, impossible to pronounce, the sharing too secret. I railed at the inconvenience of his untimely presence, was repelled by him and his failure. But mostly I feared the creeping, debilitating paralysis in process within me to attempt, affect or alter his circumstances. I fought to suppress a rising and implacable resentment of him.

Despite his condition, I doubted he had come in expectation of any well-meant handout or was here with a victim's heartrending script of manifest injustice. Whatever had brought him here that day certainly wasn't in anticipation of a free ride or the chilling but well-intended hand of charity. I didn't doubt that he had fallen from a great height at a high cost and that within himself he had reached a boiling point. He was simply a bomb waiting to go off. I remained seated in silence, wondering about him, resenting his presence. I found myself toying with the idea that the room's excessive warmth might increase his tension and agitation, cause him to come unglued. I continued to watch as he examined the contents of the room and considered their meaning.

His lips moved, the pitch initially too low to hear. His first words - slow and clear, heavily accented... "What's dis?" He points to a pile of hampers.

"Christmas" I replied. "It's Christmas." He said, "I forgot. Decemberhonest?" (Shakes his head)

"Christmas...really?" He points to bags filled with donations of groceries... "All deese bags for people who don't got?"

I say, "Sure...then some". He says, "How come?"

I say, "I guess it's what folks hereabouts do at Christmas....hard times too...I just get to deliver `em." He sits down uninvited. I pour him a coffee. "No cream or sugar, black as hell's waistcoat, right?" I say. He tries smiling, fails, and continues to sit in silence nursing the coffee cup, looking inside it for words or his thoughts or place of where and if to begin, as if they're mixed amongst the coffee grounds in the cup's bottom. I say, "Gotta place?" He says, "No".....

"Got money?" I ask. He says, "No"...

I say, "I can fix it." (A dismissive, emphatic shake of his lowered head and raised hands)

"You got sick?" I ask. (Silence followed with an affirmative nod) "You got people?" I ask.

"Only kinda." he says, and continues, "They gots problems."

I say, "We all got them." (I pause.) "I mean relatives with problems." He says suddenly, "I gotta go," finishing the coffee I'd given him as if that which pursued him had caught up with him and his only option was to flee.

"I gotta go...gotta go see `Bill`." He's trying me out I think, as if I don't know `Bill`. I say, "Chapter house meeting?" He nods. I say, "Mind we always got coffee here, black, thick enuff to tar yer roof." The remark falls to the ground. He left with the same dramatic flourish that had brought him and left me with the same indefinable feeling of him being "pursued" and a growing conviction that I'd been wrong about G.

As a Church person, a citizen, a social activist, I began to perceive the ambivalence we share in common regards poverty - the popular yet doubtful wisdom of helping only the deserving poor as objects of our charity, our unplanned and unconsidered arm's length approach, our rhetoric of exclusion which we use to such as G. without insight as to his condition and circumstance. I'm not saying there isn't compassion - just not much in relationship. We just don't know each other's language or culture or wish for that matter to discover the reasons for our poverty and their wealth...two solitudes indeed. At the time I suspected that modern day poverty, however we defined it, had been kept underground, contained in a people helping people system. What I hadn't considered was that G. knew more people in poverty hereabouts than Mother Theresa. He described a sub-culture locally, an indiscriminate community of people linked discreetly to each other, dependant on, supportive of, protective of and looking out for each other. It seemed like G. was connected in part to this nameless fraternity. He had paid his dues and was a link in the chain. Here was something close to solidarity, a community of goods.

G. came back for the next several days before Christmas and continued to come to my office in the church like he was on the payroll with benefits. On Christmas Eve he says, "Dem brown bags with da kid's toys in dem...what's da deal?"

I say, "We don't got time to get them...maybe later." (Silence... I know I have stepped on a landmine...silence)

Later he says, "I gotta idea. Dem kid's toys, I guess I could deliber `em." I say, "No. No way." Intuitively I knew I was wrong. Who better suited? He returns and says, "I gotta." Just "I gotta." No speeches, no begging. Just "I gotta." Very eloquent.

I gave him the delivery list for the toys, loaded up his old van, and shook my head in disbelief at my irresponsibility. I'd clearly lost my last vestiges of sanity. G. disappeared into the cold December night with all the toys and a quantity of hampers. By the early New Year, I was quite frankly done with Christmas, had forgotten about G. and his toys. My head was in the predictable after Christmas hangover... the pattern of empty shelves, donations down, needs up.

A knock at the door...it opens quietly...a figure in some ways like G.

He says, "Place...It's empty." Certainly sounds like him.

I agree and continue to look at him, not convinced it's G. I say, "G.?"

His laugh comes from his eyes and mouth, radiates from within. He says, "It was da kids."

I ask him to repeat. He smiles shyly. "It was da kids. I got all `em toys to the kids."

I say, "Great," relieved it went okay. I still refuse to get the import of what he is telling me.

In exasperation, he says again, "It was da kids." Slowly it dawns on me. It seems evident somewhere in the process of his toy delivery something had affected a profound change in him. He looks younger, slimmer, brighter. I marvel at the change. We have our ritual coffee accompanied by his spicy jibes. He says, "Worst coffee I ever drunk. I git way better at `Bill`s`." I ignore the jibe. I say, "Who said it was coffee. The tin said floor polish." He laughs mirthfully. I say, "So what's up?"

He tells me. He says, "Things dey got pretty bad a while back. My business... I got broke. Wife... she took off wi` da kids and some guy. Not too much work.

I drinkin` pretty bad wid dem `ladies` down on fifth street. I even sold all da tools." (It's then I notice his hands, undeniably belonging to a tradesman.) "I got no money so I lived in my van. I'm bad diabetic, maybe lose my eyes pretty quick them doctors say." I interrupt him, "What dem doctors know anyhow?"

I say, "What's this gotta do wid them kids?"

He says, "Da day I cums here I gottit in my head to go to dat high bridge downtown." His diction is clear, succinct, no doubt as to its meaning. "I gonna jump offa dat bridge, fur shure...pretty bad, huh?"

Insteads I cum here first. I takes dem hampers to dem dat needs `em. Then I takes dem toys to dem kids." I say, "The ones dem kids from dat Assumption school gave, the ones in the brown paper bags."

He didn't go on because he couldn't go on, the circumstance so intimate he never did comment on. Whatever impact had taken place on Christmas between the experience of the delivery of the toys and the kid's reception of them within the context of the recent circumstances of his life was of such a magnitude it was beyond him to describe. There was no doubt he had some deeply penetrating experience, perhaps inexplicable though nonetheless real, causing such an impact it turned him around one hundred eighty degrees. Sure some things he retained, like continuing to bad mouth my coffee, but inside something diametrical had occurred, a turnaround which had a significant effect on him. Normally sceptical, I looked at the incident critically from different angles overtime and concluded that the incident could only make sense viewed through the lens of faith.

I suspect that whatever pursued him to my office door that cold December day, the heavy tread he heard behind him, was the "Hound of Heaven" with the gift of mercy and reconciliation - so simple to define - so profound to witness. The legion of issues that pursued him and threatened to overwhelm him now seemed secondary. What I know is something new "got" born on Christmas Day. I can testify that the troubled ugly guy who broke down my door prior to the Christmas event with those children was changed, and it seemed to me irrevocably, when I saw him post Christmas.

In a small way after this it appeared to me other things were changing. The economy started to turn around, kind of like winter when the spring comes along. Work seemed more plentiful, people upbeat and positive.

Initially, I was able to keep in touch with G. I guess he spent the rest of the little time he had left volunteering at various charities. He came over for supper a few times and said my cooking was worse than my coffee. He did find a home with the local housing authority. He did lose his eyesight. He did receive a disability pension. He continued to attend his meetings with "Bill" and did his twelve-step work. He reconciled with his kids. He visited at the hospital and visited the shut-ins in the senior's complex where he lived down there at the library. Life continued to throw curved balls in his direction, losses the type that men seldom recover from. Certainly not in my presence was there a sour or recriminatory note about his loss.

He passed on some years later. I always figure a true measure of a man's life is written on the faces of those who come to see you off. All types and shades, shapes and sizes, colours and hues were there at the funeral. I smiled as the choir, little realizing the perfect congruence of the words and occasion, started to grind out a curious and discordant rendition of "Amazing Grace". Then I cried unashamed, remembering the ugly guy who broke down my doors of prejudice, not doubting his troubles would be forgotten, his losses restored with interest. Despite the many issues he faced in life, he remained faithful. G. had clearly impacted the lives of the many. I guess I was one of them.