

A FATHER'S QUEST

As if coming out of a dream, Thomas felt himself slowly becoming conscious. Sounds were entering his mind, but he was having a hard time understanding their meaning. A voice was calling out to him.

“Friend, are you alright?” a deep male voice asked.

“What happened?” Thomas wondered aloud.

The other man's strong hands helped him to an upright position. Standing a little shakily on his feet, Thomas focused his vision on the sign at the exit. One side of the sign was free from its chain hook and was swinging uncontested in the wind.

“You have a good-size bump on your forehead,” the man observed.

Thomas put this hand to his head. A large swelling was forming above his eye. “Ouch, that sign got me good. I didn't even see it coming. I ought to sue this place,” he said angrily.

“I don't know. Looks like an act of God to me,” said the man, as if amused by the incident.

Thomas looked at the man in amazement.

“You know what I mean, due to the weather, the rain, the snow, and the wind that are all beyond the hospital's control. The hospital's insurance can blame God, and then you, for not being careful enough getting out of the storm. Of course you can blame it

all on God, too. But in the end, it doesn't really matter if neither of you are to blame. What's done is done."

Thomas just shook his head in dismay and disbelief. How could all these things be happening to him? It seemed that no matter what he did he was checked at every turn. Was there a message to be received in all this nonsense? If so, then he just wished it would get to the point. He didn't consider himself stupid, and he believed that a hit on the head did nothing to improve his intelligence or attitude.

"Where were you going, friend?" asked the stranger.

Thomas took his first good look at the man who was assisting him. He was tall and slim, probably in his mid-thirties, with a full beard covering most of his face. He definitely had the outdoor look, rugged and lean.

"To my car," replied Thomas. "I have to go to the mall and buy a Christmas gift for my son."

"Can I call you a cab instead? You don't look like you should be driving," the stranger said with apparent concern.

"No, I can do this myself," Thomas answered, annoyed. However, he wasn't really confident that he could perform the task alone.

"Well, alright," replied the stranger. "But let me at least help you to your car."

Without waiting for an answer, the stranger put his arm under Thomas's arm and proceeded to help him. Thomas pointed out his car, and the man gently released him against the driver's side of the car. Almost immediately, Thomas began to faint, but the man caught him before he hit the pavement.

"Look, mister, you really shouldn't be driving alone right now. I happen to be going in the same direction as you, and if you like, I can drive you to the mall. Hopefully you will have your full senses back by then, and you will be able to find your way back alone. What do you say?"

Thomas knew that the stranger was right. He was in no condition to drive yet. The man was really going out of his way to help him, and he really wanted to get something special for Isaac. He decided to take a chance.

"Thanks, I would really appreciate it," he answered sheepishly.

"No problem," replied the man. "Just trying to be a good Samaritan. Why don't you let me help you around to the other side of the car?"

Thomas smiled at the man and his answer. He didn't think he needed help walking anymore. He unlocked the car door, gave the key to the stranger, and waved him away with his other hand. "I think I can manage my way around the car now by myself, but thanks," he responded.

Thomas walked around the front of the car and opened the passenger door, sat in the car, and closed the door. The stranger then quickly entered the car and backed it out. As they drove out of the parking lot and onto the street, Thomas observed the statue of the shepherd, and it appeared to be looking out over them as they sped away. He struggled with what next to say to the man. How do you make small talk with a stranger when you want to be left alone?

"So were you visiting someone at the hospital?" asked Thomas.

"No, I work there. I've just finished my tour of duty," he answered.

Thomas felt a sense of relief in knowing the stranger worked at the hospital. No wonder he liked to help people. It was his job.

"My name is Thomas."

"Glad to meet you, Thomas, my name is John," he said as he extended his hand for Thomas to shake. Thomas took his hand and shook it lightly. John had a strong grip. *Probably from picking up limp bodies all day at the hospital*, he thought. Would he be picking up his son's body tomorrow? A chill that was not from the cold air made his body shiver with fear.

"This sure is a fine piece of machinery that you own," John commented about the car. "Bet it set you back a little bit to buy it."

"No, not really, I try to buy a new vehicle every year," Thomas replied with pride. He was happy to be brought back to the reality of his present materialism instead of the dark possibilities of his future. "You know how it is, business and all. First impressions count."

Actually Thomas was sure that John did not know. Thomas's job was his number-one priority to getting ahead in life. He worked hard at all hours, every day of the week. He did not punch in on a

time card like most other people. But the investments that he seeded and nurtured in the marketplace someday would grow to give him the recognition and compensation that he believed he deserved. He didn't really expect that John, being a regular employee, would understand or appreciate his labor or the world that he strived to live in and desired to be part of.

"You must be a very good material provider for your family," commented John.

"Only the best for them," bragged Thomas.

"So do they define you by your job or by what you believe in?" asked John.

"My..." Thomas almost answered quickly and then stopped. It was an interesting question but not one that he felt comfortable answering to a stranger. More importantly, he was not sure that he was happy with his ready answer.

"I don't know about them, but I can tell you how the world judges people. To the world, it is not what you do or what you believe in that defines you, but how much money you make."

John looked at Thomas and smiled at his answer. "Amen," he spoke softly in agreement. "So it is more important to you to know how the world defines you than how your family defines you."

Thomas was taken back by his observation, and it perplexed him. Who did this man think he was to be asking him such personal questions?

"What is it that you are going to buy at the mall?" John asked a new question before Thomas could answer his last question.

Happy that he had changed the topic but still troubled by his flippant statement, Thomas replied, "To tell you the truth, I really don't know. I just want it to be the best gift that the world has to offer. Do you have any idea what young boys want this year for Christmas? He never asks for anything, so I have no idea where to begin looking."

"Great! So you are on a quest for a little boy."

Thomas was puzzled at the man's statement. Who did he think it was that he was looking for? Had they not been talking about his son just moments ago? He was starting to think that the hit on his head still had him confused until John spoke again.

“Your son,” John said as if he was now explaining to Thomas who it was that they had been talking about.

“Yes, of course, my son. Do you know what kind of gift I can get for him at the mall?”

“Wow! I don’t know,” John replied. “The best the world has to offer, huh? For someone young you probably would not want it to be too educational, or is he the studious type?”

“Mostly he has been homeschooled because of his illness, but he’s a decent student. Very curious, always asking about why things are the way they are or for what purpose they were created. He’s like most kids, I guess. I don’t always have the answers. I wish I did. He is normal in everything except for his illness.”

“It sounds like he has a normal spiritual curiosity for a person his age,” John said as if it was a matter of truth. “What is his medical problem, if you don’t mind my asking?”

Thomas felt annoyed at his comment. What did spiritually at his age have to do with curiosity? However, he decided to ignore it and answer John’s question.

“No, I don’t mind. He was born with a bad heart. It has a hole in it. Through the years it has gotten worse. The doctors have operated several times on it, but they can’t seem to get it corrected. Now parts of his heart are as good as dead, and he’s in dire need of a heart transplant or else he will die.” Thomas surprised himself with his matter-of-fact dialogue.

“I’m really sorry, Thomas,” responded John.

“What are you going to do? Life deals you certain cards, and you have to play the hand that you are dealt,” said Thomas as if he was resigned to his fate.

“Hey, I know a shortcut to the mall right through the park,” exclaimed John as he immediately flipped a U-turn at the first intersection. They drove by some trees behind a chain-link fence. “Maybe this is one hand that we can change.”

Thomas didn’t recognize the path John was taking him on but decided against protesting. “I didn’t know that you could go through the park this time of night. Don’t they close it at dusk?” asked Thomas anxiously.

“Maybe you just need to have a little faith, my friend,” answered John. “If we make it, it is pretty much a straight path to the mall, and it will save you some precious time.”

Thomas was starting to get really annoyed at John’s personal comments and advice to him.

John made a right turn into the park. The gates were still open. A sign on the snow-covered grass proudly welcomed them to Eden Park. The park was an old one with small rolling hills, winding paths, large trees, and plenty of bushes.

“This would be a great place for children to play hide-and-seek,” Thomas noticed.

“Yes, indeed it would be,” laughed John, “even for adults.”

Thomas fell into his own thoughts as the lights of the car illuminated the snow-covered shrubs along the side the road. Everything in the glow of the light seemed to be absent of any color and appeared in different shades of black and white. He felt that the pieces of his life were somehow coming together to a conclusion also absent of any color. Things were the way they were, and there was nothing he could do to infuse some color back into his life. He felt himself in the role of the victim of circumstance.

“Hey, Thomas, are you still with me?” enquired John.

Thomas chose to remain silent in his own thoughts. After a long stretch of road, as the car was coming out of a curve and down a slope, he observed a blanket of fog that hugged the valley floor. The fog resembled a solid gray wall standing in opposition to them. He felt like it was challenging them to enter into its midst, where you could only see that which was right in front of you. Anything else that you might find in the fog was kept hidden until it was too late to avoid it and impact was guaranteed. A place where someone could hear your screams for help but never find you until it was too late. As the car quickly entered into the blinding fog, John did not decrease their speed. The fog was all-encompassing as they sliced into it without resistance. Thomas wondered for a moment if the journey through the fog would be worth it if it cost him his life, but his pride would not let him say anything to John about slowing down.

“So, Thomas, tell me what is it that your son is best at?”

"I don't know," Thomas answered, embarrassed. "He is good at a lot of things. I guess my not knowing doesn't make me look like a very good father, does it?"

"I wouldn't say that. You just have a lot on your mind. It's understandable," John replied kindly. "Let's try this approach instead. How would you describe your son?"

"He's the most loving and obedient son that anyone could ask for. Always thinking about others first," Thomas answered him. He felt good talking about his son in a positive way and was glad to continue. "When I give him a chore to do and I tell him that I will pay him to do it, he does it exactly as I have requested. But then, he doesn't want me to pay him for doing it. Can you believe a boy like that?"

"Wow," answered John. "That is special. Why doesn't he want you to pay him for doing it? Didn't he earn it?"

"No, that's not the way he views things. He tells me that he just wants to give back to me because of all that I have given to him. He says that he would not have anything without me, so he is just giving back to me that which is actually already mine. Can you believe it? He does what I ask of him, not for the money, but because he wants to please me. He says that he loves doing things for me because he wants to, not because he has to. It makes him happy, and of course it makes me want to reward him all the more, a hundred times more!"

"That is a very interesting way of looking at things," admitted John. "You know I was thinking about what you said...that you wanted the best that the world had to offer your son," said John as he continued looking straight ahead down the road.

Thomas turned from looking directly into the fog and looked at John.

"Maybe, just maybe, you shouldn't be concerned with what the world has to offer your son but rather what gift it is that you can offer him."

"And just what gift is it that you think I can offer him?" asked Thomas. Now the man had his full attention.

"God."

Thomas took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. He was still staring at John when John looked at him, lifted his eyebrows, and smiled widely.

“You know, about God the Heavenly Father and his son Jesus. What better pilgrimage or time could you ask for than now? I mean, it is Christmas Eve. I bet someone even taught you about God when you were young.”

“What are you, someone who talks to God?” Thomas asked suspiciously. “I mean, thanks for the suggestion, but I think I can handle this on my own,” he knowingly lied while slowly shaking his head in disgust. All he could remember about Christmas past was that he wanted to keep it in the past.

“Okay, but if you need any help in this area I can help you,” answered John.

“Are you a pastor or a preacher on the side?” Thomas asked with heavy sarcasm in his voice.

“Oh, no,” answered John, undaunted by his snide attitude. “Just trying to be a good brother to my fellow man, a voice crying out in the wilderness.”

“Yeah, well this is a park we are coming out of, not a wilderness, and I think I will be able to drive myself back, but thanks for all your help anyway,” Thomas said, trying to conceal his contempt, though his voice gave him away.

“You’re welcome, Thomas,” answered John without malice. “But if the boy is to be saved, then the best Christmas gift that you can seek for him tonight might not be material but spiritual.” He looked again at Thomas but did not smile this time. With a serious look of concern, he said, “Think about it, my friend. What have you got to be thankful for this Christmas?”

Thomas leaned closer against his car door, away from the man, and just stared at him. Who was he to be giving him advice? Did John really think that he was special in this God the Father’s or Jesus’ sight, and he was not? How arrogant of him. Or was John just so full of himself that he actually believed that he was giving him good advice? Did John not understand the situation that he was in, or was he just another one of those people who think they know all the answers to everyone else’s problems, a pious and self-righteous religious freak.

“No! You listen to me. There is no God the Father. I am the

only father that my boy needs to believe in. I am the one who sacrifices for his needs. I will always be there for him even if it kills me. We can take care of ourselves. Do you understand me?" Thomas answered with extreme anger in his voice. He lifted up his hands slightly and then stopped them because he wanted to reach over and grab the man by the neck and choke the very life out of him. Who was he to judge what was best for him to do, and what in the world did he think it was that he had to be thankful for tonight? Had John not been listening to him? Flames of hate were consuming Thomas, and, at that moment, he despised the man more than any other person in the world.

John did not respond to Thomas's outburst as they came out of the fog and entered into the mall parking lot. It was bright with Christmas lights. John quickly found a vacant spot and parked the car some distance from the mall. As they exited the car, the parking-lot speakers were playing "Santa Claus is coming to Town." Last-minute shoppers were scurrying around with large red bags of gifts for the forgotten ones on their lists. Thomas dreaded entering the mall and having to partake of the season's buying frenzy.

"Here are your keys, Thomas," said John as he returned them to him. "I will pray for you and the boy and that things will get better. But remember this: when you are on a quest, some revelations are not revealed to you until you reach the end of your journey."

"Yeah, whatever, thanks, and you have a good Christmas Eve too," replied Thomas with scorn.

Feeling a bit embarrassed for being angry at John just moments ago, and not wanting to have any more conversation with him, Thomas walked away toward the mall entrance. The rain had stopped, and only a few snowflakes were falling. He felt the wind forcibly blow up from the ground level to his face. Lifting his eyes to the sky and adjusting his trench-coat collar to protect himself from the wind, he noticed an opening in the snow clouds above. A star brighter than any he had seen before was shining through. Its brightness seemed to light up all the clouds surrounding it. He stood transfixed for a moment at the beauty of the sight. Wanting to share such beauty with someone, he turned around toward the car.

"John, do you see what I see?" he asked, but John was gone.

Thomas looked in all directions, but John was not to be seen. He had disappeared as quickly as he had appeared. Thomas now felt total remorse at his behavior in the car and wished that he had another chance to make amends. He wondered if he had really been mad at John at all or just with himself. Were John's questions hitting too close to the truth? He really didn't know, and he really didn't want to know.

As Thomas continued his walk to the mall, he noticed some Christmas lights in an area surrounded by what appeared to be a fence in the darkness. When he was within a few feet of it, he determined the fence was actually a dozen timber logs. Through a space between the logs he saw one pine tree remaining in the middle of a large, open area. It was a real tree, not like the fake one he had purchased for his son. It amazed him how much the man-made tree could resemble a real tree.

"Holiday trees all sold out! One free Christmas tree left for whoever wants to take it home," read a sign posted on one of the logs.

The Christmas tree was all that remained of a tree lot. It looked pretty, and he was surprised that they could not sell it. It looked like a price tag was still on the tree, but from the distance he was away from it, he wasn't sure. He wondered how much the tree originally cost. Under different circumstances he might have been willing to take it home, but not tonight.

"Okay," he mumbled to himself, "I just need to stay focused on my mission, buy this Christmas gift, and get back to the hospital."

The wind seemed to be picking up more force as Thomas neared the center of the mall's main entrance. He noticed a group of young people near the left side of the entrance and a smaller group of people with signs on the right side of the entrance. As he came close to the larger group a female voice called out to him.

"Hey, mister, you wanna get high?"

Thomas stopped and looked toward the group. A beautiful young woman stepped out from it and advanced quickly toward him.

"I have just what you need to feel in the holiday mood," she smiled in an attempt to assure him that she was harmless. "You know, to help you get into the holiday spirit."

She was now standing directly in front of him. He couldn't get over how strikingly beautiful she was with her heavily applied

white powder, dark eye shadow, and dark lipstick masking her face. He wondered for a moment if she would look as inviting without the deceiving makeup. Nevertheless, she had him mesmerized with her long, dark hair and dark eyes that seemed to pierce into his innermost thoughts. She appeared harmless to him.

“No, thanks,” he replied, “I have my own poison, and it is legal.” He pulled out his flask from the inside of his coat and displayed it to her. He then wondered if he should be feeling proud of himself or just plain stupid.

She laughed softly and responded, “Oh, yes, I am familiar with that spirit too. However, what I have to offer you they don’t want you to have because they’re saving it just for themselves. They’ve made it illegal because they don’t want you to share in the profits. It won’t hurt you, and it will expand your mind while making you feel like a god.” She moved closer toward him in a seductive manner. With pouting lips she purred, “Come on; be a little disobedient for once in your life. Pay the price; after all, the best things in life are forbidden. It’s not like it will kill you, and maybe, just maybe, you and I can have some fun together.”

He was extremely tempted and felt that she knew it. Thomas was actually a bit afraid of her self-confidence, yet, at the same time, he was drawn to it. A small smile formed again on her lips as she held out a small red pill in the palm of her hand directly in front of his face.

Why shouldn’t he, he reasoned, everyone else is doing it these days. Didn’t he deserve some relief from his pain? It might just help him make it through the night. What profit was there in being good anyway? He knew that he was being tempted and seduced simultaneously, but at the moment he really didn’t care. It was his money to spend on whatever he wanted. He had earned it. Slowly he lifted his hand to receive the forbidden pill. He was willing to pay her price.

“Jesus is the answer for the world today...without Him there is no other way...He is the only way.” Thomas froze in his movements as he heard those words and looked in the direction of the other voices. The smaller group of people on the opposite side of the entrance to the mall were singing the song. He wondered if they were having a revival at the mall. Did they really expect to save someone on such

a cold and dark Christmas Eve? They had to be fanatics. No one else was outside except for him, the girl, and her friends. Why were they wasting their time?

“Don’t spend your time listening to them,” the woman sneered. “They are selling false hope. I have the real stuff here.”

“Actually, I really don’t need them or you,” replied Thomas, feeling that he was being yanked back to reality. What had possessed him to even consider taking the pill? He didn’t even know the cost for it. It might have been poison. He could have died. He realized that she was not harmless to him after all.

“Oh you are so right,” she purred back, “but if you get lonely, you know where you can find me.” She reached up and planted a small kiss on his cheek and then sauntered back to her group. A tall, slender man in a dark leather trench coat was waiting for her. He opened up his coat, and she entered inside it and hugged him. She seemed content and at home with him. Funny, but she had seemed that way with Thomas, too, only moments before. Both of them smiled smugly at Thomas. Somehow they made him feel dirty inside.

Thomas sensed that the man was the leader of the group, as the others then circled around him. The leader’s eyes stayed on him, and for one brief second the man’s eyes appeared bright red in the darkness. Thomas felt like an electric shock had been sent through his entire body. He turned quickly away and continued in a fast walk to the entrance. The man scared him.

He wanted to believe that what he had seen in the man’s eyes was a reflection off a holiday light. Thomas reasoned that his eyes were probably just playing tricks on him. He couldn’t admit to himself what he had actually seen. He could hear the girl laughing as he quickly retreated from them.

A young boy from the other group then started heading in his direction. He observed four men and a slender woman staying behind. Two of the men held signs. The first sign said “The Promise” in bold print. The second sign was also in bold print and proclaimed “The Appointed Time.” The young boy stopped between Thomas and the entrance to the mall, looking up to him, all the time smiling. Thomas was in no mood for any more sales pitches.

“Merry Christmas, sir, would you like to donate to a worthy cause?”

The young boy must have been around Isaac’s age. He had a baseball cap on his head. An emblem of a star was stitched in the center of it, and the cap was tilted slightly to the right. His clothes looked like hand-me-downs. He did not have a jacket on, but the cold air did not seem to bother him. His smile seemed to be genuine; however, Thomas was not in a giving mood.

“And would you be the cause?” asked Thomas, believing that he already knew the answer to his question.

“No, sir. We will give the money to the Rescue Mission so that the lost and homeless people can eat there tonight.”

“How do I know that you will give the money to the Rescue Mission and not spend it on yourself?”

“I guess you don’t. You will just have to trust me,” the boy answered candidly.

“The other group over there was going to give me something for my money. You want me to give you money, but you aren’t going to give me anything in return. Now, why would I want to do that?” asked Thomas.

“Because it is better to give than to receive,” the boy replied without hesitation. He seemed sincere in his response.

Perhaps the child has been briefed or programmed on how to answer questions, Thomas thought. However he was so young and innocent looking that Thomas found he actually wanted to believe the boy. This thought disturbed him for some unknown reason, so he quizzed the boy for more answers.

“Why aren’t you inside the mall where it’s warm and where there are lots of other people who might like to give?” asked Thomas.

“The stores didn’t want us in there anymore, so the owners of the mall kicked my parents and I out. They said our presence was offending some people and ruining the holiday spirit for them,” replied the boy without any apparent animosity.

“What is your name?” asked Thomas. The boy was beginning to intrigue him.

“Joshua, at your service,” he replied as he removed his baseball cap and bowed low before Thomas out of respect.

“Well, Joshua, my name is Thomas. Who are those other people over there that you are with?” Thomas asked as he gestured for the boy to stand up straight. He did not want other people looking at them and jumping to any kind of wrong conclusion.

“My father...uh...my mom and dad. The men holding the signs were already here,” answered Joshua, looking to the group for a moment and then back to Thomas, still smiling.

“Do you know what is meant by their signs?” asked Thomas, hoping the boy might clue him in.

“The ‘Promise’ sign is about why we celebrate Christmas, and the other sign is about each man’s appointed time. If you like, I can take you over there to meet them, and you can ask them yourself,” offered Joshua as he extended his hand, expecting Thomas to grab hold of it and follow him.

Thomas looked down at the boy and smiled, but he didn’t take his hand. He concluded immediately that if his parents were not with the other men, then Mom and Dad were probably having their son beg for their own profit. Thomas wanted to go over and yell at the parents, because he felt empathy for the boy; instead, he decided that he just didn’t have the time. He only hoped the parents would not spend all the money they received on drugs, but also on a Christmas gift for the boy.

“No, not tonight, Joshua. I am just too busy, maybe some other time. Funny thing though, just tonight I was asked that very same question by my son about why we celebrate Christmas. His name is Isaac. He’s around your age. Wish I had the time to ask them their reasons. But I’m sure it is all up to interpretation anyway,” answered Thomas as he pulled out his wallet.

He opened up his wallet and noticed he only had a \$100 bill left. *Great*, he thought, *my last bill*, and he was sure the boy would not have any change. Did he give the boy everything he had, or should he just walk away? Why were all these decisions being put upon him tonight of all nights? He determined that he would just have to charge the gift for Isaac on his credit card.

“Here, Joshua,” Thomas said as he handed the boy the gift. “I’m just thankful that there are still young people like you around. You give me hope. Tell your parents to take part of it and to buy you a Christmas gift on me.” Thomas was feeling the Christmas spirit and was truly glad that he was able to give. He gave to the boy without any reservations.

Joshua looked at the large bill with big and pleased eyes, and his smile broke out into a huge grin that filled his face with joy.

“God bless you, sir. I will request that my father listen to your petition and answer it for you this very night,” shouted Joshua as he excitedly ran back to his parents, holding up and waving the monetary offering at the same time.

“What petition?” asked Thomas, but the boy did not hear him. *What a formal way to respond*, he thought. Did the boy think that his father was a judge? And what petition was he talking about? Even so it really did not matter much to him that he didn’t understand the boy. Sure he felt a little foolish, but in a grand way that he enjoyed. He smiled as he walked away to enter the mall.