

# A Christmas Story

*By Peter McFadden*

It was one of the worst times of my life. My non-profit organization, which I had founded three years earlier, was near bankrupt. Soon I would have to fire my employees, many of whom had become my good friends. The little money I had left was barely enough to feed myself. And it was Christmas.

And then something extraordinary happened. I call it "a Christmas story."

I was going over the edge. To be frank, I was nearly delirious. I could not remember the last time I had slept well. Not only was I facing the dread of having to fire my staff, but there were other problems as well.

Our little non-profit, known as the Central Europe Institute, was no longer so little. We now had offices in Prague in the Czech Republic, in Bratislava in Slovakia, and in Washington, DC. The twelve young, industrious Czechs, Slovaks and Americans who worked for me had become something like a family to me.

We were doing great things together, helping entrepreneurs start small businesses where previously, during decades of communist rule, it had been illegal for them to do so. We were helping these enterprising men and women live in freedom, and we, ourselves, were experiencing the thrill of being free for the first time in our young lives, as we were discovering what we could do on our own.

It was a wonderful time, and we shared a spirit that made us feel proud, happy and close.

But it was all coming to an end.

The good work we were doing, the many successes we had enjoyed, and the fun we shared along the way made our impending downfall all the more painful.

I was facing our financial crisis alone. My staff worked out of Prague and Bratislava. I was back in Washington, trying my best to find the money to continue our activities overseas.

The financial pressure was intense. All our potential sponsors had been approached. None seemed ready to jump to our aid. And, with the Christmas season in high gear, certainly none were thinking of us. It was not a good time to ask for help. And I did not want to trouble anyone with my bad news at a time when all should be happy. I didn't. I kept my worries to myself.

My problems were numerous. In addition to the lack of money, there were paperwork demands that needed to be satisfied. Our government wanted to know how we had spent the money we had received in previous years.

I was terribly confused, and worried. Accounting is not simple math and our government's tax rules are often mysterious. What would happen to me if I didn't do the job correctly? I was young, had little experience working with the IRS, and at those moments of deepest frustration I always seemed to remember the stories of those jailed for failing to comply with the rules.

I found myself staring at hundreds, if not thousands, of pages of tax publications that would have to be read. And everywhere around me, it seemed, were piles of receipts written in a variety of languages that would all have to be made sense of. Wading through this mess of paper was not a happy prospect.

And then there was my office. Because I had little money to live on, it was also my home. I had one large desk, one couch which I could sleep on, some shelves, and a small bathroom with only a toilet and a tiny sink. There was no kitchen or refrigerator.

These cramped quarters did not help. The first thing each morning, as I opened my eyes, I was immediately confronted by my impossible workload. Late at night, it was still there, right in front of me. All day long with no break.

I couldn't sleep. I felt like a failure. I was about to disappoint all those I involved in my work. I worried about my own future. Could I ever get another job when I so grandly flopped in this one?

And it was Christmas. It made it all worse. If I ventured out onto the street, what did I find? Happy people. Beautiful music escaping out of swung open doors. Festive decorations everywhere. Shoppers scurrying about carrying attractively wrapped presents.

Their joy only reminded me of my pain. And those presents, I had no money to buy them for my loved ones. I was from a large family with a growing number of nephews and nieces. What would I tell them as I came home empty-handed?

Christmas was just three days ahead, and I had no options left. I was miserable. I tried my best to work my way through those mounds of paper, despite being in such a foul mood. The lack of sleep was catching up to me. My brain grew increasingly less able to function, and the fears that were running rampant through my mind wreaked greater and greater havoc.

The hour was getting later and later, and I was going delirious—over the edge.

I was losing touch with the world as we know it, the one in which our body knows which way is up and which way is down. All of a sudden, my chief concern was maintaining a sense of balance, only I could not find a stationary plane to stabilize myself on.

In desperation, I stopped work and just sat there. I had been through hard times before, also at Christmas. How had I survived?

### **It's a Wonderful Life**

I thought of the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, and remembered how, in times past, watching it had restored a sense of peace to me.

The movie's hero, George Bailey, memorably played by Jimmy Stewart, was also facing a crisis. His bank, at Christmas time, was about to fail. He would have to let down all the people who had relied on him: his employees, depositors who had entrusted him with their money, and the families that had built their homes thanks to his loans. He also had his wife and kids to think of. All these people stood to lose if George failed.

George, facing this crisis, and at a loss for what to do, flees. He makes his way to a bridge outside of town where he considers leaping off to his death. Before he acts, though, his plan is foiled by Clarence, a bumbling "angel second class," an amiable old white-haired man described as having the "IQ of a rabbit" but the "faith of a child." What does Clarence do? He jumps into the river himself, knowing that George would immediately forget about his own problems and set out to rescue him.

After the two dry off, Clarence takes George on a tour of the town, pointing out along the way how valuable his life has been to the people who lived there. George is able to see what Bedford Falls would have been without him—an unseemly place, with many of his friends down on their luck.

In the meantime, the town's residents, finally aware of George's problems, collect money from among themselves to save George's bank.

George, after Clarence's intervention, rushes back to his wife and children, and soon finds himself in the midst of the Christmas party of his life. The town's residents gather with the money they had collected, a brother arrives from far away, his children are happy, and everywhere there is love in the air.

For George, it's a wonderful life.

He turns to thank Clarence, but Clarence is gone. Having saved George, he's earned his reward: his angel's wings. No longer is he an angel second class.

I had always loved this movie, and it never failed to straighten out my perspective on life, so I thought to watch it, but among all the problems I was facing, I faced some others: I didn't have a television or a VCR. The movie might bring me back to the edge, but how could I watch it? What instead could I do?

Like George, I fled.

### **A Midnight Walk**

The hour was late, it was near midnight, and it was bitter cold out. A fierce wind had swept everyone off the streets of Washington.

I loved this kind of weather, when I had to think. The harsh conditions allowed me no false sense of comfort, and I was glad to have the streets to myself. With so many problems to sort out, I prepared myself for what was sure to be a very long walk.

Unlike George, I was not headed for a bridge, and I had no thoughts of ending my life. To my surprise, though, I did run into a friendly old man. I would find out only later, after having the chance to listen to him talk and upon noticing the gold replica of the monstrance\* he wore on his lapel, that he, too, like Clarence, had the IQ of a rabbit but the faith of a child.

At first, though, I walked right by him. I was less than a minute into my walk and was focused on the problems preoccupying my mind. But five steps past him, I stopped. What, I asked myself, is an old man doing huddled on a doorstep at this hour in this weather?

I turned and walked back to him, and as politely as I could, I asked, "Excuse me sir, but do you have a place to stay?" He answered that he did not. "Would you like to stay at my place?" He would.

As we began the short walk back to my office, he told me, "It's a good thing you came by when you did because I just decided to kill myself." The cold weather was that bad, he had been suffering through it for many nights, and, he told me, a homeless friend had just ended his life the night before.

I was stunned. All of a sudden, I forgot my own problems. Through one small act of kindness, I had saved someone's life.

Soon we were back at my office. Robert was exhausted. I gave him my couch to sleep on, my pillow to rest his head on, and my blanket to keep him warm.

Desperately in need of a good night's sleep myself, I wrapped myself in my winter coat, folded up a towel to use as a pillow, and lay down on my dirty floor to sleep.

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\* A monstrance is an elegantly appointed receptacle used in churches to display the Host, which Catholics believe to be the Body of Christ.

I awoke the next morning to an important revelation. I had never slept better. I never felt so satisfied. Robert was still sound asleep on my couch. I told myself, "Peter, you now know how to get a good night's sleep: give a good night's sleep to someone else."

After a short walk down the street for a cup of coffee and some small breakfast, I sat down at my desk to work, Robert still sleeping behind me.

Gone was the panic that had gripped me in the days before. My problems were the same, but now I did not worry about them. I quietly went about my work, and even though there was no end in sight and no solution at hand, I was at peace. I did the only thing I could do: work in the hope that somehow the situation would soon change for the better.

Robert didn't wake up until six in the evening. He had slept for eighteen hours.

He was hungry, and his body was shaking. He could not control the movement of his hands, and as he walked I feared he might lose his balance and fall over.

I took him out for some dinner at a nearby restaurant. We made our way to a table in the middle of a room filled with stylishly dressed, young people, and we sat down together, myself and this scruffy old man, who hadn't shaved or bathed in days.

Robert ordered soup, but he couldn't keep a steady hand on his spoon. So, I helped him eat.

I was vaguely proud of myself, but mostly I was in awe of what was unfolding before me. I did not set out to help this man, I had not given a minute's thought to what I was doing, I simply had done what seemed right at the moment. And, here was the result: he was having a warm meal and I was at peace. What was so elusive to us just a day before, somehow, was now ours.

When we got back to my office, Robert immediately went back to sleep and I returned to my work. Later, I myself got another good night of sleep, once again on the floor.

The next morning, Robert and I both awoke at a normal hour. He looked terribly unkempt. The white growth on his face was thick and his hair unruly. His hands were still trembling, so I did something it had never occurred to me that I would ever do.

I took a towel from my closet and soaked it in warm water in my sink. I pressed the towel to Robert's face to soften his beard and then applied shaving cream. With my razor, I carefully shaved his face and then, with the warm towel, I washed it clean. With a few strokes of a comb and the dabbing of a dry towel, Robert was soon just fine. I thought to myself, "What a distinguished looking man," and I told him, "Robert, you look like a million dollars," and he almost did.

He gave out a good laugh.

As I had work to do and Robert did not want to sit around all day, I asked him what he normally did for lunch. He said he liked a certain meal at *Sbarro*, an Italian fast food restaurant, so I gave him the little more than four dollars he needed and we agreed that he would come back to the office in the afternoon. Again, we would have dinner together.

## Christmas Eve

It was now the day before Christmas, and I faced a decision: would I go home to New York to my family for the holiday? What would I do with Robert?

I was embarrassed about having no presents to bring to any family members, and I could hardly pay for the trip to New York. And there was still so much work to be done. So, I was not eager to go home.

But I was more worried about Robert. How could I leave him alone? Even if I gave him the keys to my basement office and let him stay there by himself, he might fall coming down the steps, hit his head on something, and no one would find him for days. I couldn't let that happen, so my choice was made for me. I would stay. Only one difficulty remained.

How would I tell my family?

Christmas was an important holiday for us. I am the sixth of seven children and my parents, particularly my Mom, liked to have us all at home. I had never missed a Christmas before.

We are a Catholic family, and I hoped my parents would be proud that I was taking care of a man in dire need. But miss Christmas, such an important holiday, and spend it instead with a homeless man I did not know? How could this be explained?

And then I thought, "a homeless man at Christmas."

If one had to spend Christmas away from one's family, what more appropriate reason could one have than to care for a man without a home? Jesus Christ, after all, entered this world on the first Christmas as the most famous homeless man in history, there being "no room at the inn" for Mary and Joseph.

Still, it was hard to call my parents.

They were concerned. Homeless people can often be violent. Some are criminals. Was I foolishly putting myself in danger? I explained that Robert was a harmless old man, nearly sixty years of age, born in Ireland, but too simple for this world we live in. Someone had to care for him. And on this Christmas, that someone was me.

Christmas mornings for me had usually been noisy affairs. Our house was always so crowded it was ready to burst at the seams, with many children running happily

about. "Merry Christmas," "Merry Christmas," "Merry Christmas," we would all heartily greet each other.

But this Christmas was different. At my office, there was no tree, no presents, no music, no children, just the two of us, Robert and me. All we had that morning was silence. A beautiful silence. My spartan room was filled with the spirit of one man taking care of another man on Christmas day. We were experiencing Christmas at its very essence.

I gave Robert, again, the four dollars and change he would need for lunch and he set out upon his way. I celebrated the day by continuing my work, of which I had so much to do, and I worked contentedly, even happily.

## The Last Day

When I awoke on the 26th, time and my money was running out. I had less than ten dollars to my name. And late that night I would have to travel to Prague one last time to fire my employees. I consoled myself with the thought that, with Christmas day past us, at least they had enjoyed the holiday undisturbed by any worries.

As much as I wanted to care for Robert, I could no longer do so. Fortunately, I had found a church in Georgetown with a shelter that would take him in. Later that afternoon, after he returned from *Sbarro*, I would drop him off.

As I gave Robert that morning the four dollars and change he would need for his lunch, I took comfort in the knowledge that he was going to be taken care of.

But, as for me, looking at the five dollars I had left, I told myself: "Peter McFadden, today you will eat lunch but you will not eat dinner." I did not panic, though. I was perfectly calm. I simply accepted my humble state. I even remember being a little curious. I had never known hunger before, and that night I was to be introduced to it.

I pondered the fate of our Institute, and even though its end was imminent, I remained at peace. I had done all that I could and the thought that I had saved Robert's life was the best antidote to any feeling of personal failure I had once felt.

I enjoyed my short walk to the Cafe Blanca for lunch that day. I spent my last dollar on the same chicken sandwich I ate every day, the sandwich made so well by

my friend Jason, the cafe's owner. He and I talked, as we usually did, about football. No one watching us, not even Jason, would have sensed that this might have been my "last lunch."

As I walked back to my office, with only a few coins left in my pocket, I remained contented. It was not mine to worry about what might happen to me, only to take quiet pride in the fact that I had done the right thing.

I thought back to all the years of Catholic school education I had had, and realized they had not been wasted. I had found myself with very, very little, yet, upon finding someone who had even less, I had readily, even happily, given away what little I had.

As I entered the building that housed our office, I stooped down to pick up the mail that had just arrived. As I leafed through the envelopes, I was surprised to find one from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in New York. I had submitted a request for funding to this foundation not long before but had not expected to hear from them for another few months, which would have been a few months too late.

I opened the envelope and, inside, found a letter notifying us that we had been awarded a grant of \$50,000.

I would not have to fire my employees after all, and our great work would continue. My first experience of hunger would have to wait for another day.

My last dollar, which I had just spent, was not my last dollar after all.

Robert never came home that afternoon. My guess is that he feared life in a homeless shelter, which can be dangerous, and he did not want me to take him to one. I searched for him everywhere I thought I might find him, but he was not to be found.

I hope one day to see Robert again, in heaven, with his wings. Then, I can thank him.

In the meantime, I thank God for my wonderful life.

*The events described in this story, which took place at Christmas, 1992, are all true, and have been faithfully recorded by its author. Peter McFadden continued to serve as President of the Central Europe Institute until early 1998. He now resides in Cold Spring, NY.*