

The Why Cafe Christmas

by John P. Strelecky

Chapter 1

The old man looked through the window of the cafe. Inside he could see red booths with tables in between them. Beyond those, a long silver counter stretched almost the entire length of the place and there were individual seats arranged one after the other along the entire length of it. He could see Christmas decorations stretching across the counter. Green garland and red ribbons. Silver bells and small Christmas statuettes. Farther into the cafe, the lights on a Christmas tree were blinking on and off in a slow rhythm.

The lights in the cafe were dim, like the place might be closing. But there was an “Open” sign on the door and he could see coffee cups and a pot of coffee with steam rising from it, sitting on a ledge behind the counter.

He pulled the door open and went inside. A whoosh of warm air swept over him, which was a welcome change from the frigidness he had felt while looking through the window.

As he looked around and noticed there weren't any other customers, he thought about leaving.

“How good could it be if no one else is here?” he thought to himself.

But he could smell the coffee and it smelled good. Plus he was tired and cold and at the moment what he really wanted was the chance to sit down, take the chill off, and be alone for a little while.

“Hello, Max,” a voice said.

Chapter 2

Max turned quickly. He had been looking at the coffee pot and the sudden sound of the voice surprised him. As he turned, he dropped the newspaper and keys he had been holding. He reached down and gathered them up, then stood and looked at the person who had said his name. It was a woman. From the way she was dressed, he assumed she worked there.

“How do you know my name?” he asked, with a slight amount of distrust in his voice.

She smiled and nodded toward the keys in his hand. “It’s on your keychain,” she replied.

He glanced down at the keys in his right hand. It was true, there was a small, rectangular gold colored piece which said “Max”, hanging from the key ring. He had picked it up at a garage sale a long time ago and it had been on his key ring ever since.

Max wasn’t sure how the waitress could have seen it when he’d been holding it tucked up with the newspaper. It unnerved him a little.

“Are you open?” he asked gruffly.

The woman nodded slowly and smiled again, “Going to be closing up in a little while. But you’re welcome to have a seat.”

Max nodded and slid into the booth he was standing next to. There was something about the waitress which made him feel uncomfortable. But he liked the fact that he could feel his toes again after being outside in the cold air. And he wanted some coffee.

“Coffee?” she asked and reached over to grab the pot he’d seen earlier.

He nodded, “Sure. Black. No sugar. No cream. Just black.”

She grabbed a cup and walked over to his table.

“Why are you here?” he asked as she put the cup down and began to fill it.

She smiled at his question.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve walked past this building a lot of times and I’ve never seen this place before. Looks brand new in here. Plus it’s Christmas Eve. Don’t you have someplace to be?” he asked in his still grumpy voice.

She nodded, “I do have someplace to be, actually.” Then she gave him a mischievous smile and gestured toward the kitchen, “I’m supposed to be back there cleaning things up. But I saw you looking through the window and I figured with how cold it is, you might want a quick cup of coffee before I finished up and headed home.”

Max wasn't sure what to say. He wasn't used to people being nice to him. "Well, thanks, I guess," he finally replied.

The woman extended her hand, "I'm Casey."

He felt uncomfortable. This place was strange. But he didn't want to be rude. "Max," he replied and quickly shook her hand. Then he remembered she had already called him by his name. "You already know that I guess."

The uncomfortableness he was feeling was growing by the second. All he wanted to do was sit down in a warm place, take the chill out of his bones, and drink some coffee. He didn't want to be talking to a waitress. Especially one who made him uncomfortable.

The woman smiled at him, "Max, I bet you want to just sit and relax for a few minutes, not spend the night talking with a waitress. And I have that cleaning-up to finish in the back. So how about I leave you on your own for a little while. She put the coffee pot down on the table. "I'll leave this here so you can help yourself to a refill if you'd like." Then she reached over and took a row of sleigh bells from the counter and put them on the table too. "Not only decorative, but pretty loud too," she said. "You need anything, you give these a ring and I'll come check on you." She nodded, "Sound good?"

He nodded in reply. He wasn't sure how she had seemed to know what he was thinking. He took a sip of his coffee and nodded again, but she was already heading back to the kitchen.

Chapter 3

Max shook his head a little, trying to clear away the strange feeling he felt. Then he took a few more sips from his coffee cup. He looked around. The place was empty. The only motion, the blinking of the lights on the Christmas tree. His newspaper was sitting on the table where he'd dropped it when he'd sat down, and he reached for it.

"Vroom, Vroom," a little voice said. "Screech. Back it up and dump it here, sir. You're cleared to go."

Max looked behind him. He had sat in the third booth, his back to the door. There had been no one in the cafe when he'd arrived. There had been no one in the cafe a few moments ago when he'd looked around. But now when he turned and looked at the table behind his, he saw a young boy playing with a little wooden dump truck. It had blue doors, yellow sides, and wheels that had been painted bright red. The hair on Max's neck stood up a little when he saw the boy. Max looked around quickly, but there was no one else there. Just the boy.

"All set with your delivery, sir. That will be thirty-five cents, please," the child said. He moved the truck farther along the table. "All right, and you're free to go," he continued.

When he had moved the truck to the end of the table, the boy looked up and looked straight at Max. "Hello."

Max looked around again, but there was still no one else there. The little boy was talking to him.

The little boy turned the truck upside down. "This is my truck. See, I put my name on it." He pointed at big block letters which were drawn in purple crayon. S A M. Sam. That's my name."

Sam looked up at Max, "What's your name?"

Max looked at him, and at the truck.

"You know, what do people call you?" Sam asked.

"My name's Max," Max replied hesitantly. "Where are your parents?" he asked.

"I'm five," Sam replied, not answering Max's question. "It's a pretty fun age. My birthday is right after Christmas. That would be number six."

Sam held up his truck, "This is one of my presents. My mom and dad gave it to me early so I'd have something to look forward to when I saw them again." He looked at Max, "How old are you?"

"I'm...I'm seventy-one."

Sam's mouth fell open, "Wow, that's *really* old."

Max nodded, "Yes, it is."

Max's neck and back were hurting from twisting around to look at Sam.

“Want to see my truck?” Sam asked. “Here, I’ll bring it over.” He left his seat, walked over to Max’s booth and slide into the seat across from him. “It’s a dump truck,” Sam said and put the little truck on the table.

Max looked at him, “What are you doing here, kid? It’s Christmas Eve. Where are your parents?”

“They’re waiting for me to come back,” Sam replied in a matter of fact voice. He picked up the truck, “Do you have any trucks? We could play.”

Max shook his head, “I’ve never had a truck.”

Sam’s eyes got very wide, “Really! How come?”

Max paused. His thoughts flashed back to a small room. It was sparse except for the seven metal cots crammed into it. The room was dark, just one small light hanging from the ceiling. It had been more than sixty years since Max had been in that room, but in his mind he could still see every detail of it. The single change of clothes hanging from a wire hanger at the end of each bed. The worn shoes sitting beneath them. The grey sheets, which were so thin they provided no warmth from the winter cold. There were no toys. There was no color. There was just loneliness and misery.

“I just didn’t have any,” he replied sullenly. “I didn’t have much when I was a kid.”

Sam nodded, "Then I guess it's a good thing you're an adult. Now you can have whatever you want." He smiled, "You know what my friend, Nana told me once?"

Max shook his head.

"Nana's my neighbor. She takes me to the park all the time. She's really old like you. One time I fell off the monkey bars and it hurt *a lot*. I told her there was no way I was going up there again. After that fall, *no way!*"

Sam picked up his car and started moving it along the table, making zooming noises.

"What did she tell you?" Max asked.

Sam stopped moving the car and looked at Max, "She said if I was going to let my past dictate my future, I should pick a better part of my past." He smiled, then held up his hands and shrugged, "I had no idea what that meant. So then she explained that I should just remember one of the times I'd been on the monkey bars and didn't fall, instead of the time I fell."

Max nodded, the memory of the small room coming back to him again. "What if you don't have a better part of your past?"

"Are you kidding?" Sam replied. "I've crossed those monkey bars like a million times without falling. But Nana told me even if I'd never crossed them once, I could find something to be grateful for. Like that I could walk up to them. Which is true, because one of the

kids at the park only has one leg. He has a really tough time doing stuff like that.”

Max was quiet for a moment, “Nana sounds like a nice person.”

Sam nodded, “Yeah she’s really fun.” He picked up his truck again and made more noises as he wheeled it along the edge of the table.

“You know what else Nana told me?” he asked.

Max sighed. His goal of having a quiet cup of coffee was clearly not going to happen.

“Do you know what else Nana told me?” Sam asked again.

“What?”

“She said everyone has a gift to give. Sometimes it’s things. But sometimes a smile or a compilment is even better.”

“A compilment?”

“Yeah, that’s when you tell someone something nice about themselves. Nana says you can change someone’s life with a compilment.”

“You mean a compliment.”

Sam nodded, “Uh huh. That’s what I said, a compilment.”

Max looked at him, “I’d rather have a truck.”

“Me too,” Sam replied. “But I guess if you can’t give that, you can always give a compilment.”

Chapter 4

Sam looked around the cafe and then looked at Max again, “Are you staying here for Christmas?”

Max shook his head, “No.”

“Are you spending it with your family?”

“I don’t have any family.”

“Who gives you presents?”

For some reason, the question annoyed Max. His voice was angry when he replied. “*Nobody* gives me presents. As a matter of fact, nobody *ever* gave me a present. Not in seventy-one years. So you’re lucky you get them. Look, kid, I’m just here to get some coffee and read my paper. Then I’m going to go home. I don’t have a family. I don’t have presents, and I don’t care that it’s Christmas. To me it’s just another day of the week. OK?”

Sam was quiet for a few moments. His eyes began to water and after a few moments he looked up at Max, “Nobody ever gave you a present?” he asked quietly.

Max sighed deeply in exasperation, “Look, I’m sorry kid. I didn’t mean to yell at you. Listen, your parents must be wondering where you are. You stay there and I’m going to go ask the lady who works here if she can help you.”

Max started to slide across his seat and as he did, Sam's demeanor suddenly changed. A strange look came across his face. "I have to leave now. It's time for me to go," he said quietly.

"Exactly. That's what I was saying," Max replied. He stood up and turned toward the kitchen. As he did, the sleigh bells Casey had put on the table got caught on his sleeve and fell to the floor. They clattered loudly. As he bent down to get them, he heard the kitchen door open and when he looked up, Casey was coming toward him.

Chapter 5

“Everything OK?” Casey asked, when she got close to Max.

He shook his head, “I need your help. This kid needs to go and I don’t know how to get in touch with his parents.”

Casey looked at him confused. “Kid?” she replied.

Max looked at her annoyed and turned toward the booth, “Yeah, *this* kid...”

The booth was empty. Max looked under the table. He looked in the booths on either side of his. He looked in every booth in the cafe and in the bathroom. There was no one.

“His name is Sam,” he explained as he walked back to Casey. “He’s a little kid. He told me he’s five.” Max looked around again, “He was just here.”

Casey looked down at Max’s newspaper. It was sitting on the table, still unread.

Max followed her gaze. “What is it?” he asked.

Casey nodded toward the paper.

Max picked it up and unfolded it. He looked at the front page, where there was a picture of a little boy. In the caption below, it said Sam Candler, age 5.

“That’s him,” he said and looked at Casey. “That’s the kid.” He quickly scanned the story.

Condition worsens for Sam Candler, age five, who fell through the ice while trying to save his elderly neighbor. Although he was rescued, the boy has been in a coma ever since being pulled from the icy water, and is in critical condition. Doctors fear that because of the seriousness of his injuries, he won't make it through the night. People around the city have been following his condition and have extended their love, support, and prayers to the family.

Max was taken aback. "How can that be? He was just here. He had a truck with him. His parent's gave it to him as an early Christmas present so he'd have something to look forward to when he..." Max paused.

"When he what?" Casey asked quietly.

"When he saw them again," Max said slowly. He reached for the table and gripped it. He was feeling unsteady.

"Are you OK, Max?"

He shook his head, "He said something else. I was getting up to go get you and he changed all of a sudden. His expression changed and he said he had to leave now. That it was...it was time for him to go."

Max felt a pain beginning to grow inside of him. It started in his chest and spread so fast and so deep he felt like it would tear him

apart. He gripped the table even tighter and his eyes filled with tears, "He's just a little kid," he said quietly. "He's just a *little kid!*"

Casey put her arm on Max's shoulder. She was quiet for a long while. "I'm sorry," she finally said.

Max jerked away from her. His movements were erratic. He reached into his pocket, and quickly took out some money and put it on the table. Then he started for the door.

He was halfway to it, when he heard Casey's voice.

"Is this yours, Max?"

He turned. She was holding something. It was a small present wrapped in red and gold Christmas paper.

"No," he said angrily and turned back toward the door.

"It has your name on it."

Max stopped. He turned slowly, his eyes focusing on the present. He walked to Casey and took the gift from her extended hand. Sure enough, his name was on a small tag taped to the top of the gift. Slowly, he removed the wrapping paper. Inside was a small wooden dump truck. It had blue doors, yellow sides, and wheels that had been painted bright red. He turned it over and on the bottom, the name SAM had been X-ed out with a purple crayon. Next to it, written in the same purple crayon, it said, "MAX" in small block letters.

"I guess he wanted you to have it," Casey said quietly. "A Christmas present."

Max closed his eyes and gripped the truck tightly. His shoulders slumped forward and he didn't move. He couldn't breathe.

Suddenly there was the sound of car horns. Lots of them. Then church bells began ringing. People were cheering on the street in front of the cafe. "Come on," Casey said to Max, and walked to the front door.

"What's going on?" she asked a young woman on the sidewalk.

"It's that little boy," the woman replied, "from the story in the newspaper today. The one who fell through the ice. He woke up from his coma just a few minutes ago. They just announced it on the radio. The doctors say it's a miracle. A complete Christmas miracle. He woke up as if nothing had happened. He told them he would have woken up sooner, but he had something to do first. The doctors say they don't know how it happened. It's a miracle."

Max was standing next to Casey now. He had heard what the woman said. "A miracle," he said quietly.

Casey looked at him and smiled, "A miracle," she replied.

Max gripped the small wooden truck in his hand. He didn't know what to do. He was filled with something he had never felt before.

"Max, can I ask a favor of you?" Casey asked gently.

Max looked at her.

"The cafe is closed tomorrow because some friends of mine and I are having a Christmas party here. Would you come as my guest?"

Max hesitated. He wanted to be there, but he didn't know how to say yes. "I'm not really good around strangers," he finally said.

Casey smiled, "You'll like these people. I promise. It's the guy who owns this place and his little girl. And some other friends too."

Max hesitated again. "OK," he finally said. "OK, I'll come."

Casey smiled, "Five o'clock tomorrow night."

Max nodded. He turned and started to walk away, then he turned back. "What's the name of this place anyway?" he asked, and nodded toward the cafe.

"The Why Are You Here Cafe."

Max gave her a perplexed look, then shrugged and started to turn away.

"Hey, Max."

He turned.

"Merry Christmas."

Max glanced down at the truck in his hands. He looked at the cafe, then at Casey. "Merry Christmas."

About the Author: John P. Strolecky is the #1 Bestselling author of *The Why Cafe*, *Return to The Why Cafe*, *Life Safari*, *The Big Five for Life*, *The Big Five for Life Continued*, *How to be Rich and Happy* (co-author), and his latest book, *Ahas! - Moments of Inspired Thought*. For more information visit www.johnstrolecky.com