Finding the Fat Man

a holiday story for friends and family

by
Bo Wilson

I guess you wanna hear about the time I went after the fat man.

You'd think someone that big and that loud wouldn't be so hard to track down, but for such a famous guy, he sure knows how to make himself scarce. Christmas magic or whatever, I guess. Ho-ho-hocus pocus. Still: If a guy exists, I'm supposed to be able to find him. That's what the little box in the yellow pages says, right next to my name, right? "Michael Womack: Whoever they are: I can find them."

Of course, nobody much uses the yellow pages anymore. The little bit of business I get comes mostly by referral. A couple of desk sergeants at the local precincts will bounce work my way, especially if it's an easy way to get an angry wife or girlfriend out of their station house. Then, if they climb the five flights of stairs to my little office and knock on the pebbled glass, and if I happen to be in, and if they're willing to pay my rate—a hundred a day plus expenses— then I do my best to live up to my slogan.

But this time, everything was different. The client, the job, everything.

For starters, the client? He didn't come to my office. He found me on Shepherd Avenue, ducking into the December wind as I dodged through the winter-coated crowd moving along the sidewalk, everyone's head down, plowing ahead through all of the Christmas cheer. Myself, I didn't love it the way I had when I was younger. Christmas is for people who have energy, and every day I felt a little more tired. So, so, tired, the kind of tired that feels like no amount of sleep can dispel. I just wanted to get out of the crowd.

Then, suddenly, there he was, right in front of me, smiling. I nearly knocked him over, and I barked "Hey now!" because I was so surprised. I don't care how it sounds, I'm just telling you: one second he wasn't there and the next second he was.

The other weird thing? He was a kid

He looked up at me, all fifty or sixty pounds of him, in a little coat with a knit cap. I couldn't tell you how old he was. Maybe ten, twelve, but he was one of those kids who look like senior citizens, you know what I mean? Something in the eyes, and there's a stillness to them, like they know things other kids don't. He spoke in a high-pitched voice: "Mr. Womack?"

I don't like being recognized by people I don't know, not even kids. That feeling of someone else knowing more about what's going on than you do, like you've got some catching up to do? I don't like that feeling.

So I just stared at the kid, and he lifted his hands, apologizing. "I didn't mean to startle you Mr. Womack, please forgive me."

Yeah, exactly—what kinda kid says "Please forgive me?" Was he on his break from being some other kid's butler? I just kept staring, but I'll give him this: He didn't lose his nerve. I've given that same stare to adulterers, welshers, and every other kind of cheat, and it can make people fold

like wet cardboard, but not this kid. He just looked me in the eye and said "I've got a job for you. You need to look for the person known as Santa Claus."

I know it sounds like the set up of a joke, or maybe like the kind of pitch they hear wherever it is they make all those lousy Christmas movies, but this kid wasn't laughing He *was* smiling, just the tiniest bit, but I think that's just how his mouth sat on his face, you know? It was the kind of almost-smile you see on guys who say things like "please forgive me" and "my good fellow." The kid shoulda been in black and white, he seemed that much out of place. But, like I say, confident.

I'd be lying if I didn't say I wasn't a little bit interested, but I'm a businessman. I never met a kid who could go a hundred a day, never mind the expenses, but I guess this kid was a mind reader on top of everything else, because right away he said "I can pay you for seven days' work plus a retainer. I think that if you start here…" and he hands me a slip of paper, then finishes, "… you'll be well on your way to getting the job done."

I shoved the slip of paper into my coat pocket and just asked "What kind of retainer?"

The kid held out a paper sack, and I took it. "What's this, you paying me in groceries?" I muttered, but I reached inside and felt a weird shape, something hard. I pulled it out. For a second, I couldn't make sense out of what I saw. A doll, a male doll, wearing only fatigue pants. It was a GI Joe, but it was one of the old ones, about a foot or so tall, and yeah, antique toys are unusual, but that wasn't the most unusual thing about it.

The most unusual thing was the writing on his chest. Black ink, faded but still legible, spelling a name: "Mike," the letters shaky, obviously written by a kid, with a capital "M," little "i," then capital "K" and "E." Not so strange, maybe, except that Mike is *my* name… and that's exactly how I used to write it. Then I saw the scuff marks on the left side of the head, and the memory came back all at once. Those scuffs had happened when I dragged the GI Joe behind my bike one day, trying to see if I could go fast enough to make him look like he was flying.

This was my GI Joe, from when I was maybe five or six years old.

I looked up, ready to confront this kid, to ask him what was going on and where he'd gotten this, *how* he'd gotten it. I was shaken up, and confused, and angry.

But the kid was gone.

Normally, when someone offers me a job and something feels off, I just say "no." This thing felt so far off that it coulda been in another galaxy, but with the kid gone, there was no one say "no" *to*. I heard a voice in my head say "just forget it," but I almost laughed out loud. There was no forgetting this. This was a weird kid, asking me to do an impossible thing, acting like everything was completely normal, then handing me a toy he woulda needed a time machine to find, and then he's just gone? It was too weird to be a prank, but there was no way it was real, either.

I wanted answers, and the only one who might be able to give me answers was the kid, so it looked like I was gonna have to jump through at least a couple of hoops before I could corner him and wring an answer or three out of his smug little neck. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the slip of paper he'd given me. It was an address, and it was only a few blocks away.

I started walking.

While I walked, I tried to think about the case like a professional. I had a feeling that the only way I was ever gonna see this kid again was if I made some kind of effort to do what he'd asked. Find Santa, huh? How does someone do that?

Most people think that finding someone is about social security numbers and old addresses and landladies who never got their last month's rent and so on, and yeah, sometimes that stuff is useful, but what works best for me is thinking about the person. I'll tell you something about human nature: We are what we do, and most of us can never stop doing it. We can change jobs, addresses, spouses, you name it, but the things that make us who we are? The gambling or the drinking or the romancing or the showing off? Those are things we can almost never stop, even if we try. So this Santa guy, what did he do? He gave out presents. He made and delivered toys. He fulfilled wishes and answered prayers. Giving. That was the thing he'd be doing, wherever he was.

I glanced again at the slip of paper, and saw that I'd reached the spot. An address filled with a converted warehouse, a big sign over the door: A CHANCE FOR CHARITY. Sounded like a place for people who like to give. Maybe the kid had been on the money .

I stepped inside, and looked around. There were about thirty of those long, folding tables, and at every one of them people were busy either wrapping gifts or preparing them to be wrapped. It was mostly toys, but there were some clothes and a couple of tables of decorations, wreaths and ornaments and whatnot.

"Name?" A tough-looking woman chewing on a pen like it was a cigar stood in front of me, holding a clipboard. She said it again: "Got a name?"

"I'm Mike," I managed.

She nodded. "C'n'I do f'ya, Mike?" I wasn't exactly sure how to answer this question, but she saved me. "Y'here to help out?"

I nodded. "Sure thing," I said.

"This way." She pivoted and started walking toward the back "MARV!"

A big fellow at one of the tables looked up. This was apparently Marv. "No need to holler, Patty, I'm right here," he said mildly.

“Marv!” she trumpeted again. “’s here’s Mike, he’ll give yins a hand, yeah?” She turned to me. “Needjya to help Marv strippin out the prices, he’ll show you, ‘preciate the help!” and she was moving away, hollering for someone named Brianna.

Marv stuck out his hand, and I shook it. “Meetcha,” he said, then he showed me the one-step task I’d be performing. “Simple as pie. Find the price tag, get a little piece of tape, stick the tape to the tag and then pull. You don’t have to get the whole tag, just pull off the part where the price is. Santa doesn’t put prices on things, right? Here.” He shoved a big pile of toys my way. “Once the prices are off, just move em to the end of the table.”

“Zat where Santa picks em up?” I asked.

Marv laughed. “Dunno about that. Lady called BethAnn been doing it today.”

I smiled back at him. “Sounds good.” Then I went to work.

I was slower than Marv at first—he had a complicated system involving little bits of tape at the end of every finger—but before too long I was holding my own. “You know,” I said, trying to sound offhand, “if Santa isn’t using this system, he’s missing a chance.”

Marv laughed again, and I could tell laughter came easily to him. I liked him, and I felt comfortable pushing a little further: "You’ve never seen the real guy himself, have you?”

He didn’t laugh this time. Instead he looked at me like I might be crazy. “The real who? The real *Santa?*”

I shrugged, trying not to look anxious. “Why not? You never know.”

Then he *did* laugh, and my anxiety retreated. He spoke again, and what he said brought my antenna all the way up: “It’s funny, you saying that, because I mean, “the real Santa,” come on, right?”

“Yeah?”

“Like, let’s not kid ourselves, let’s be the grownups in the room, etcetera etcetera, except….I mean, I don’t wanna sound stupid here, Mike.”

“No, no, of course,” I quickly assured him.

“But last week? We had a guy in here three days running, and I mean, he was right outta central casting, big belly, white beard, loud laugh, the whole package. And fast? My gosh, that guy worked fast, you could barely see how he did it, he was wrapping, I dunno, a toy every few seconds, like when they speed up a movie or something you know? And he must had one of those whatchacallit, a photocentric mem’ry, he got *everyone’s* name, brought doughnuts one morning, got everyone singing carols one afternoon, then boom, gone. Never came back. Hey PATTY!” he bellowed.

“MARV!” she answered from several tables away.

“C’MERE!!”

Patty and her clipboard came back. “’cha want?”

“Remember that guy last week, the Santa looking guy, brought the Krispy Kremes? He didn’t leave any kind of, whatchacallit, forwarding address did he?”

She squinted into the middle distance for a half second then nodded. “Said he was gonna lend a hand at Soup f’the Soul.” Then she looked at me. “You a cop?”

Before I could even deny it, Marv was shooing her away “We was just wondering, Patty, let us work!”

“WHO’S STOPPIN YINS?” she hollered as she moved away.

Marv grinned at me then said “Soup for the Soul is a homeless shelter offa Aintree Street. Whatcha wanna do, find the guy and give him your list?”

I felt the GI Joe in my jacket pocket and nodded. “Something like that.”

I didn’t go right away. There was something about the work that I liked—simple, and useful—and Marv and I reminisced about some of our own favorite toys—race cars and board games and yeah, GI Joes. Marv said “I had one that talked, you have one of those?”

I suddenly couldn’t remember whether the scuffed Joe in my pocket had the pull string for talking or not, but I wasn’t about to check right that second. “I think so?” I offered.

He nodded, then asked “You know what the best thing was?”

“What?”

“Getting a toy you wanted was great, even if it didn’t happen very much. But the *wanting*. I think that mighta been the best part. A real toy could only do what it could do, you know? But the toy you *didn’t* get, the one in your imagination, the one you wanted? That sucker could do *anything*.”

I knew exactly what he meant, and I said so. We traded stories of toys we’d loved, mostly simple things—Hot Wheels and their orange track with the purple connectors, and the Mousetrap game (which we agreed we never actually played, we just built the trap to watch it work) and the paratroopers with the little plastic parachutes that only worked every third or fourth throw. We worked briskly as we talked, for another two hours or so, and it was the most pleasant afternoon I’d spent in a long time. Feeling useful, laughing with a new friend, remembering the joys of simple, eager wishes.

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When I left and was out of sight, I pulled out my GI Joe, and sure enough he had the little string you could pull to hear him bark out "Follow me!" or ""Let's take that hill!" I pulled the string, and heard the well-remembered hissing rotation of the tiny disk inside him, then came the voice, tinny and enthusiastic. "You're doing great, Mike! Keep it up!"

I stared at it for a beat then stuffed it back into my coat pocket to keep from flinging it as far as I could.

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Soup for the Soul was another re-purposed warehouse, divided into several smaller areas. There was a small meeting area that I guessed was for religious services and various recovery meetings, and across from it was a large dining area and a kitchen (presumably the place where the Soul Soup was prepared.) Up an open staircase was a second level which was a dormitory for overnight stays. Doreen (this place's version of Patty) listened to why I'd come, and then nodded. "He told us his name was Kris," she said. "He worked here for a couple of days and nights."

"A good worker, yeah?" I asked.

She smiled to remember it. "Good isn't really the right word. Miraculous would come closer. His second day here, a lot of the kitchen staff was late, something with the trains, and before you knew it he had *three* big vats of soup going, and I hadn't even seen him doing the prep. But there they were!"

"Did he give you any idea where he was headed? When he left?"

"He said it was time he was getting back home. Wherever that is. Say," she said, her eyes narrowing, "why are you after him? He's not in any kind of trouble, is he?"

I lifted my hands to placate her. "Not at all." Then I lowered my voice. "But come on. Haven't you ever wanted to meet Santa?"

She smiled back, with a weariness that made me feel she was a bit of a kindred spirit. "Maybe a long time ago. I'm too busy these days. You wouldn't wanna stay and help out, would you?"

I felt like I owed her something for her answers… and on top of that, I really did want to help. It was odd. I'm not the volunteering type, and you're not gonna find my picture in the dictionary next to "do-gooder" but the toy place had made me feel good, and I had a hunch that there was more good feeling waiting for me here. I felt this wild urge, and pulled out my GI Joe. "Lemme ask the boss," I said, and then I pulled the string. It hissed and then said "Give em a hand, Mike!"

Doreen grinned and clapped her hands like a kid at a magic show. “That’s great!”

I grinned back at her. “Where do you need me?”

I peeled potatoes for an hour, and then I washed pots and pans for awhile, and then I set five or six dozen places at the long tables, and then I took a turn at serving the soup and the bread to the grateful and the hungry—people who had fallen on hard times, and who needed a meal, but even more than that needed to feel like people again, needed to be treated with simple respect.

While we worked, we took turns listing our favorite holiday foods, laughing at the horrible jokes (“Yams? I yam what I yam!”) and feeling that special fellowship which comes from people remembering things in common even when they’ve never met before. One of the women, Lucille, said nothing was as good as the smells when everything was about an hour away from being ready, and none of us disagreed. It was a different version of what Marv had said about the wanting being the best thing.

It was late, and even though I had no special reason to be getting back to my cot and my hotplate, I didn’t want to wear out my welcome. I said my goodbyes, shook hands, exchanged hugs, and made my way out into the bracingly cold, crystalline night.

I hadn’t gotten twenty steps down the sidewalk when the kid was suddenly in front of me again, and again I shouted in surprise. It was even weirder for it to happen without a crowd of people around, and this time the kid had company: A large, fellow, all smiles, and with a white beard.

“Looks like maybe you don’t need my help after all,” I ventured, then asked “Kris? Mr. Claus?”

The big man bowed, his eyes twinkling, but he said nothing, glancing toward the kid, who spoke. “You’ve done amazingly well, Mr. Womack. And so quickly, too!”

“The spirits have done it all in one night,” I murmured, and the big man’s eyes widened as he gave a great laugh in recognition of the line. It’s hard to explain that laugh, but it was like being hugged by a sound. It wrapped and it held and it comforted, and even though some distant part of my brain felt like I should have been cross with these two, I was as happy as I’d ever been. “Well,” I said, “it looks like you found who you were looking for.”

The kid’s ancient-looking eyes widened, and he shook his head. “Oh, no, Mr. Womack, you’ve misunderstood. It was you who needed to look and to find.”

I couldn’t figure what he meant. “Okay, but you asked me to find this guy, so okay, all I was doing was—"

He cut in softly. “If you think back very carefully, you’ll remember that I never said I needed you to find him. I said *you* needed to look for him.” Then they both beamed at me.

I thought back, and the kid was right; he'd said "You need to look for Santa Claus." He hadn't said anything about him needing anything. But the distinction wasn't clear to me. "Okay, I'll bite, why—"

"Mr. Womack." The kids eyes were huge and I really don't wanna say it, but it's true, they were affectionate The were *brimming* with fond feeling, and he continued "Is it really so great a mystery?"

"You're a good fellow, Womack," the big man rumbled in a voice that seemed to shake the buildings around us. "The Morton girl four years ago, you found her dad for her, and you didn't charge her a cent?"

"And three years ago, Mrs. Pierce, who needed that doctor who had retired and moved away?" offered the kid. "She needed him to help her with her respiratory condition, you practically went without sleep for five days until you tracked the doctor down, and again, you did it gratis."

I moved closer to him, studying his face as I wondered over his use of the word. "Gratis?"

"No charge," explained the kid.

"I know what it means!" I retorted.

"You're a good fellow," the big man repeated, "but these last couple of years, it's been harder and harder to *be* good, hasn't it? The parts of you that act with generosity have… well, maybe they've grown weary. A bit faded."

I didn't understand. "So I'm what, behind on my giving? I didn't realize I owed the world much of anything."

"Not the world," the kid said softly. "Yourself. We became worried about you. When a person loses that great a piece of themselves, they're sure to soon beginning losing other parts. Before long, the whole *person* has faded. Do you see?"

Both he and the big man were watching me carefully, to see whether I understood. I thought I did… and I suddenly understood something else, too. "You're not a kid, are you?"

"Told you," said the big man.

"Gloating is unattractive," said the not-kid back. Then he took off his cap, and I saw the delicate, pointed ears it had been hiding.

"Who—what are you?" I asked.

"I am Blaine," he said, as though this explained everything. "I'm a maker," he added.

I had to ask: "And how old are you?"

“Oh, my,” he sighed. “The reckoning changes from plane to plane but let us say that I’m well past three thousand years old.”

“Three—three *thousand??*” I sputtered.

“Doesn’t look a day over twenty-six hundred, does he?” chuckled the big man, who continued as Blaine glared at him. “Here’s the deal, Womack, you did all these lovely things, you found people who needed to be found, and somewhere in recent years you lost something of yourself.”

“The Christmas part,” added Blaine.

“He gets it,” said the big man. “So I had Blaine here send you looking for me, because even though you were never going to find me, it was the simplest way to help you find something more important.” He pointed at my chest. “The guy in there who knows how to give more than free manhunts.” Then he shrugged. “The guy who remembers Christmas.”

I thought it over. All day I’d been feeling simple pleasures the likes of which I hadn’t felt in a long time. And that weariness I’d grown used to, like some burden I just expected to feel on my back? Gone. They were right, these two. I didn’t understand the *how* of *any* of it, but they were right. Then I had to ask: “And you’re the ones who made the GI Joe say that stuff?”

“Not me!” The big man was pointing at Blaine. “This one! It was his bright idea!” Then he smiled like a guy who’d just won a big bet, and added “I *told* you it was creepy.”

“Didn’t you intend to give Mr. Womack something?” asked Blaine mildly. I got the idea that ignoring the big man was one of his favorite things.

“Yes! Right! Well done, Blaine, thank you, yes!” He patted himself like Columbo trying to find his notebook, and then reached into a pocket and withdrew something small and graceful and gorgeous. A magnifying glass. He handed it to me; I held it gingerly. His voice became apologetic. “A little cliché for a detective, I know, but still.”

“It’s beautiful,” I said, and I meant it. “Thank you.”

Blaine shook his head, thoroughly exasperated. “You always leave out the important bits,” he said to the big man, then he looked at me. “That was the favorite magnifying glass of a gentleman known as Sherlock Holmes.”

My face wrinkled. “Sher—okay, but he’s, you know. Fictional, right?”

The big man’s eyebrows climbed to the top of his forehead, and he leaned forward and whispered “So am I.” Then he cut loose with another of those laughs, and lemme tell you—in that moment, all things were possible.

Blaine's hand touched my arm very lightly. "That glass will show you things that make any mystery much easier to solve. Take good care of it."

I nodded. "I promise," I said.

"Gotta go!" said the big man. "Lots to do, all that. Drop you anywhere?"

I had no idea how that would have worked, and I shook my head. "I think I need to walk a little."

He nodded. "I get it. Clear the old noggin. Nice meeting you, Womack,."

Blaine smiled at me. "It has been a rare pleasure, sir."

What do you say when a couple of miracles are saying thank you? All I could think of was to bow…. and when I straightened up, they were gone.

"Be well, fellows," I said quietly. I tucked the glass carefully into my coat pocket and pulled out the GI Joe, still marveling as I pulled its string. Then the thin, metallic voice:

"Follow me!" was what it said.

But to me, it sounded an awful lot like "Merry Christmas."

December 5
North Chesterfield, Virginia,
with snow on the ground.