

Aisle Five

By Chris Brenk

Sunday December 18th:

Katie opened the door with anticipation and pranced over to my desk.

"Daddy, when are we getting mommy a Christmas present?" she said tugging on my shirt.

I smiled, "No worry sweetie. There's plenty of time for that. Why don't you go back and look at her list again and decide what you think we should get her."

"Ok. But remember daddy - Christmas Eve is on Saturday" she said with a look of concern.

I watched my six year old then frolic out of the room and I glanced up at my calendar a bit surprised.

"Ya I guess it is isn't it."

Friday December 23rd 6:00 pm:

"Dad are you sure you don't want to hang out with us when we start shopping?" Jenna said holding her little sister's hand and walking up to the Mega-Store entrance.

"No that's fine. You guys go ahead. I'll do my own thing. Just stay together and make sure you don't let Katie out of your sight."

"We're fine dad. It's you we're worried about" she said laughing.

"Hey come on now, I was born for this. I'll meet you at the car in two hours right?"

"Yep" they both said as they disappeared into the store.

I paused a moment to make sure I had my wallet then looked ahead to the front doors.

"Ok let's do this"

I mumbled to myself with about as much confidence as a 0-10 football team playing on the road.

Fifteen minutes after making my way into the retail giant I was already on my last leg. Not in the sense that I was almost done shopping but rather that I was nearing a level of sheer exhaustion.

This was a bit shocking as I have run close to twenty marathons in my life. I know what it's like to hit the wall and how to push through to the finish line by slugging down energy drinks and feeding off the animated crowds. So with that I had no real fear of an innocent shopping trip.

This was a serious miscalculation!

The onslaught of the crowds, blazing lights, ringing bells, jolly gents in Santa suits, products with UPC's lined up on shelves lusting to reach my shopping cart, and an atmosphere thick with despair were closing in on me from every direction.

At first I was thrilled by it all. I felt a sense of adventure, drawn in by the challenge and countless choices screaming at me. People milling around, little kids running, laughing, screaming, crying. How sweet I thought. I felt alive.

That lasted about five minutes!

It started with what I can best describe as a dull numbness. Then my eyes began to strain. I was constantly darting back and forth scanning products and dodging others who were trapped in the same prison. The overbearing lights were burning down on me, quickly leading to optical overload. My eyes became red and frantic. I was operating with what I call an open eyed REM cycle. All of this was beginning to give me a slight headache.

Mentally though I was still holding my own. Despite an empty cart, I was remaining optimistic as I maneuvered my way through the store.

Then I saw it.

Straight ahead - The toy aisles! The Promised Land!

My body surged with adrenaline as I was confident things would go quick now. Gather up a few toys for the girls and then a quick stop in the kitchen appliance aisle for a new blender for my wife and game over.

Life, however, likes to throw an occasional curve ball and this venture did not disappoint. In fact it may have rivaled the Israelites, whose journey required a parting of the Red Sea to reach their destination.

The front left wheel on my cart was basically out of commission pulling radically to the left when it so desired.

When it rammed into eighty seven year old Clyde Porter who was coming at me in the left lane I knew it was bad. The cart sent his cane flying, knocking him backward into a lingerie display at the entrance to the woman's section.

Several employees jumped in to rescue Clyde as his wife looked on keenly wondering if her husband was in shock or smiling. I quickly apologized and passed along the carts mechanical issues to one of the employees then rolled on.

When I reached the first toy aisle things did not look right. I assumed something had happened. Maybe someone fainted or was hurt. There was a crowd buzzing around the aisles much like a swarm of bees reacting to an attack on their hive.

"It's not possible"

I said to myself as I stood on the edge of the pack looking in.

"Everyone's shopping!

The only emergency here is that these people have empty carts like me and it's the day before Christmas."

Sweat was now pooling on my skin as I looked around for any alternative. Then I spotted the hardware section three aisles over that looked fairly quiet.

"That could work!"

I shouted to no one.

"Maybe some colored light bulbs for my girls and an extension cord for..."

I said with less enthusiasm as my brain finally engaged and realized how ridiculous the idea was.

There was no way around it – I had to go in.

My numbness was now burgeoning into a full-fledged headache. Fueled by mounting anxiety and panic, I was now perspiring as if I were on mile twenty one of a marathon. I thought about texting my daughters to see if we should try another store but knew that would not fly.

Besides it could be construed as a sign of weakness. I would have nothing of that after all it was just a shopping trip.

Suddenly my thoughts were disrupted by a voice booming through the overhead speakers.

"THERE IS AN EMERGENCY FOR MILDRED BAXTER. MILDRED BAXTER PLEASE REPORT TO THE CUSTOMER SERVICE AREA IMMEDIATELY."

Mildred Baxter? Hey I know her. That's Herb's wife. They were going shopping today as well, I thought to myself.

"Oh Boy. Herb didn't make it."

I mumbled shaking my head.

"He probably had a heart attack or was trampled or maybe he..."
I stopped and took a deep breathe.

"Get a hold of yourself man. He probably just got separated from Mildred and was worried...or not."

I was jolted from my panic by a squirrely, young boy who was shoving me into several bodies to my right as he maneuvered past me to grab a *Hulk Smash Toy Vehicle* from the shelf. Not a word from him like, *excuse me* or *Merry Christmas*. He was simply on a mission.

Then I thought, aren't we all.

Ok I'm in. Now find some toys.

Sorry Herb you're on your own.

Several minutes later I was deep in the aisle amongst a sea of people being tossed about as if we were all on one of those bumper car rides at the carnival. I had a feeling like I was inside a pinball machine and was quickly losing perspective.

Then I happen to look along the top shelf and my face lit up.

"There you are!"

I exclaimed as I eyed my prize just down the aisle a bit:

"Minion!"

The fuzzy yellow blob creature would be a fine catch for Katie. I just needed to grab him. Easier said than done. I was only about ten feet from him but there was a lot of traffic between us.

It would be tough sledding!

My first obstacle was two ladies involved in what I can best describe as a serious conflict right in my way. One had a red sweater that said "*Joy of Christmas*" stitched on the front and the other a "*Jesus is the Reason for the Season*" bracelet on her arm and both had hold of what looked like a doll.

Upon closer observation I could see it was Elsa. The doll was one of the icons from the movie *Frozen* and was being pulled by her arms in two different directions as the ladies engaged in a harsh verbal exchange.

I thought about stepping in and maybe offering up Solomon's wisdom of cutting Elsa in half in hopes one would surrender her campaign, but before I could express it, Elsa was ripped in two.

One threw her half in the others face and the other threw hers to the ground and they both clutched their carts and plowed into different directions.

"Tis the season"

I said looking down at what was left of Elsa.

I then pounced on the void they left and slid my cart closer to where Minion was perched. I was beginning to feel confident.

Moments later my hopes began to fade as I spotted a shopper – a man looking like he was in the same predicament as me - right in front of the fur ball. He looked up at Minion then over to me and smiled. He turned back and snatched the last critter from the top shelf dropped him into his cart and made a swift exit.

I just stood there stunned for a moment. Slowly I welled up with anger and frustration. Then gradually I found myself almost cheering the guy on. After all he was one of us. He was going to make it. Cart full, to the check out, then the parking lot and then home - gifts in hand and all set for Christmas.

I was bumped back to the bedlam by more salivating souls shoving their way along the aisle. I was becoming more and more frustrated and overwhelmed.

I began feeling a sensation like I was all alone even in the frenzied crowd. As I gazed down the aisle, it seemed like there was no way out.

I was trapped. Trapped in aisle five!

I scanned the landscape for any way out. Nothing doing. Then I looked down at my pathetic cart - barren as the Dead Sea.

I wanted to release my loudest Tarzan scream I had in me.

Instead I looked blankly at a shopper next to me and calmly said,

"That's it."

Our eyes met and he stared at me briefly then he turned back and continued his quest.

I dropped my head and muttered,

"I've had enough."

The mission had just changed.

My hands slowly let go of the cart. Its final resting place may be aisle five but I was determined to forge a different outcome for myself. My perspective was now survival.

The repercussions of leaving the store with no gifts on the day before Christmas were now weighed against the instinctive will for human survival. The decision was easy. I simply needed to get out of this store. I needed air.

I would live to shop another day - maybe.

As I looked around my options were not good. Packed in like a can of sardines, I had no path out. Looking up, I pondered an aerial escape. I could crawl up and over the aisle. Then I remembered it was no better on the other side – more toy aisles, more people.

Assessing my predicament I noticed a small boy standing about five feet from me. He stood still with a sheepish grin on his face for several moments then moved on.

"What's that all about?" I said under my breath.

I knew soon enough as a distinct odor permeated the aisle. Only a skunk could have rivaled the smell that began to disperse the crowd. Holding my breath, I saw my chance and scurried through the opening to a main corridor of the store.

I felt an inkling of hope as I gathered up speed loping toward the front of the store. Keeping my sights on the exit doors ahead, I noticed Mildred Baxter out of the corner of my eye. She was standing by a bench at the customer service counter waving at me. Herb was sitting down holding an ice pack to his head.

I kept my eyes on the front doors ignoring her like I didn't see her. I kept marching to the exit. I almost felt ashamed for abandoning my friends but I needed air. The marines could practice "leave no man behind."

In here it was every man for him-self.

I then passed a series of checkout lines stacked deep with shoppers waiting to pay for their goods. They could have passed for inmates in the chow line at a maximum security prison. They looked beaten, conquered by the relentless retail attack.

Carts full of gifts of obligation, which they could not afford, for people who could care less, in the name of a Holiday that had been hijacked by marketers and turned into a product exchange.

None of it was making any sense. I needed out. Finally. The exit doors.

"Freeedom!"

I yelled raising my arms as I beelined it through the front door and into the parking lot.

I bent over for a moment and took a deep breath as if I had just crossed the finish line of a race.

Then I stood up and darted through the parking lot to my car in the back row. I unlocked it and climbed in. I sat there a moment just staring out the window.

Still feeling confined, I decided to get out and climb atop the hood of the car. I stretched out leaning against the windshield, put my hands behind my head, and gazed up into the night sky.

Even with the lights from the parking lot, the stars looked magnificently bright. I began to feel at peace as I peered at the myriad of celestial bodies shining from the Heavens. The air felt crisp and I could breathe. Slowly I was regaining my perspective.

What in the world had just happened? Why was I falling apart on a shopping trip? Was it all in the quest for a gift? What happened to Herb? Why did I just abandon him and Mildred? Why did Elsa have to die? Why did two PTA ladies lose it in aisle five? Why did those people look so solemn in the checkout line? Where was Christmas in all of this?

I continued to gaze into the sky for a few minutes.

Then I had what I thought might be an epiphany.

“Right there!”

I said raising my arm and pointing my finger up to the night sky.

Then my thoughts began to come together...

There's Christmas right in front of me. Look at those stars.

It's about a God who created all of this majesty when He spoke the universe and all of creation into existence.

It's about a God who placed these countless stars in the heavens and knows each of them by name.

It's about a God who created all mankind including me in His Image. Created to fellowship with Him.

And when sin entered the world and separated us from Him,

it's about His profound and astounding love.

A love that would require the greatest of sacrifices - His Son Jesus.

That's Christmas - a time to celebrate a chapter of God's plan of redemption. A plan where His Son Jesus stepped out of the heavens from the right hand of the Father and into this sin-ridden world.

To be born in a lowly manger in Bethlehem.

Why?

So that He could fulfill His Fathers will.

To live a sinless life and walk the road to Calvary. To die on a cross as the perfect and only sacrifice that could pay the penalty for sin. To rise again conquering sin and death. And to provide a way for man to restore his fellowship with God.

That's Christmas.

But why would He sacrifice His Son? Why would he do that?

Love.

An undescrivable, undeserved, unconditional love for you and me. That's why.

I began to feel overwhelmed and humbled.

My eyes, that just a short time ago, were red and frantic, were now moist with tears. The gateway to my soul that was crying out to God in reverence and thanksgiving.

Then I slowly closed my eyes and quietly thanked God for His love, for His forgiveness, for His Son Jesus, for Christmas.

Time passed. Then my watch beeped and I noticed that my two hours was up. The shopping trip was over. The girls would be returning any minute. I climbed down off the hood and back into my car.

I saw the girls exit the store and start walking across the parking lot. They were giggling with shopping bags in hand. I smiled. I knew exactly how I wanted to spent the last day before Christmas.

Tonight would be time spent together. Whatever we did it would be with them, with their mother, with family.

Later on I would grab my laptop, a cup of coffee and in the quiet comfort of my office I would shop online. Because we live a bigger city I could pay for the guaranteed four hour delivery and have my gifts tomorrow – just in time for Christmas.

In the morning I would take a loaf my wife's banana bread and a batch of her cookies and pay a visit to Herb and Mildred. I would share a cup of coffee with them and apologize for avoiding them. I would offer to help them get ready for their kids and grandkids who would be arriving tomorrow night.

Then I would return home to celebrate Christmas with family. Spending time together, making memories, and yes, exchanging a few gifts.

The focus, however, would be on the real treasures – love and relationships.
And the most precious gift, the greatest gift of all time.
The gift that brings real hope – Jesus!

Arriving back at the car Jenna said,
“Hey dad you made it back.”
“Daddy look what we got. Lots of stuff”
Katie added holding up her shopping bag.
“How was shopping for you?” Jenna inquired.
“Good. It went good” I said
“Better than it did for Elsa.” I added under my breath.
“Elsa? Jenna said.
“Like on the movie Frozen?” Katie asked.
“What do you mean better than Elsa?” Jenna added.
“I’ll explain later girls. Let’s just go home.” I said smiling as I drove out of the parking lot.

The End