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My Father, the Christmas Doctor, and the Danish Nurse Who Saved His Life

by Tom Weber

My father, Dr. John Peter Weber, was born to German immigrants in Creston, Iowa in 1888. At the age of eleven he realized he wanted to become a doctor. After finishing the eighth grade in 1904, sixteen-year-old John rode the rails to Montana to help lay railroad tracks, intending to save his wages in order to continue his education. Treated brutally by his foreman, he left the railroad construction job and traveled to Portland, Oregon, searching for work in the lumber industry. The young man from Iowa fell victim to a pickpocket on the streets of Portland. All his savings were gone. Unable to find any employment, John sank into illness and despair. He was living on the street, sleeping under a bridge, and surviving on one meal a day from a soup kitchen for the homeless on Burnside Street. Every now and then he was arrested for vagrancy. The police would throw him into a horse-drawn paddy wagon in which a little mountain of twisted bodies heaved and tossed against each other.

One night, as he languished on the jailhouse floor, his earnest blue eyes innocent and glowing, one of the inmates asked him what he wanted to be "when you grow up." "Oh," replied John, lifting his head from the floor and propping his chin up with his fist, "I'm going to be a doctor." The other men inside the cell roared with laughter at the absurdity of a bum becoming a doctor.

A few days later, on the afternoon of December 17, John worked his way down a street in Portland, hoping he could make it to the food wagon. After a time, he leaned against a storefront to rest. Bustling crowds passed, laughing faces with breath visible in the cold, arms carrying gaily wrapped packages. None looked back at him. He began to walk again. It was difficult to stay upright. Presently, a group of well-dressed men approached. John didn't see them in time to get out of the way and one of them, a tall, long-faced dandy in a brown derby hat, shoved him rudely off the wooden sidewalk. He fell on his back in the gutter full of slush and rocks. The men continued onward while one said something about John and the rest burst out laughing. Slowly, John regained his feet and staggered in the general direction of the meal wagon, pain shooting up his back. He hobbled over to where

the wagon stood, the pressure of the line of other ragged men holding him up and moving him forward. The countertop was set up. John got his food, then lay on the ground, drinking soup and munching bread. The wind blew his flimsy jacket open at the front. He began to cough spasmodically. It hurt deep in his chest.

A heavy, icy rain spurted down from the gloomy sky. Drenched, skeletal cats prowled around, rubbing their hips and tails against him, searching for crumbs. Someone was standing over him. She was wearing a green cape and a cotton dress, sashed at the waist. The young woman's eyes were blue, friendly over her white smile. She bent over him, her dark-green cape open, the brim of her floppy hat touching the top of his head. She studied his eyes, the blue irises nearly swallowing the pupils and shining with illness. "Young man," she asked, "what is your name?" John tried to think, but he couldn't remember. He looked away, making no reply. His face was pale, his cheeks chapped from the cold, his lips blistered. His hair was long and dirty, sticking out in all directions and over his ears.

She tugged at his arm. "Why don't we walk down the street together?" she offered, then helped him stand. "Come and have supper with me. Come, young man, please come." A wave of vertigo swept over him as he stood, bent and stiff like an old man. He looked down at his frayed trousers, stiff with dirt, and at last mumbled, "My name is John." She helped him walk along the sidewalk. He dropped to a knee from time to time, his feet nearly frozen, his lips moving as if he were speaking, but no sound came out.

They entered an apartment house and slowly climbed the carpeted stairs. At length, a small lamp illuminated one of the doors, and she opened the latch. "We'll have supper in a minute," she said, settling him in a chair. She lit the gas stove burners with a long match. "But first you'll have to take a bath," she insisted, smiling. She showed him to the bathroom and started the water in the oval porcelain tub, then left. John slowly undressed and lay in the water, amazed at the simple feeling of warmth and comfort. He thought of his tattered, filthy clothes, regretting that he would have to put them on again, then noticed she had set a pile of old, but patched and clean clothes on a chair by the door. After a while, when the water had cooled somewhat, he climbed out of the tub, dried himself off, and put on the clothes. Shaving himself in front of the mirror was a shocking

experience because he could clearly see how much his appearance had deteriorated.

He limped out of the bathroom and gazed around. A colorful Christmas tree stood in a corner, about four feet tall. There weren't any fancy ornaments, just shiny red apples suspended by threads, and many lighted candles of various colors in small metal holders clipped to the branches. A few colorfully wrapped packages sat at the base of the tree near a nativity scene, whose clay figures gazed into the manger.

Wearing an apron over her lovely flowered dress, the young lady was placing food on the table, her dishwater blond hair brushed neatly back. They sat at the table and she offered a loving prayer over the food, graciously thanking God for sending John to visit her. There was soup containing vegetables, meat, and noodles, a far cry from the pitiful rice water he had been getting at the wagon. There were homemade biscuits, cubed steak, and mashed potatoes smothered in butter. A small buttercake lay on the sideboard, ready for slicing. John gulped down his milk, grabbed a couple of pieces of steak with his fingers, and popped them into his mouth. He lifted the bowl of soup with both hands, ready to slurp it like an animal as he had for so long at the wagon. The lovely young woman picked up a spoon from the table and looked at him, smiling. He ate in complete silence, overwhelmed by his incredible fortune, still wondering whether it was real.

When he had eaten all he could, he raised his hollow face from his meal. "Do you feel better now, John?" the young woman asked. He nodded. "What is your name, ma'am?" "I'm Nancy Jacobsen. I'm a nurse," she said, folding her napkin neatly on the table. Strangely, she didn't seem to fear him, a stranger. He felt that she was a brave soul. "Well, Miss Jacobsen," he said weakly, "you're a wonderful lady and I am truly grateful for this meal." He rose from his chair, stiff and feeble from illness. "I'll be going now. I sleep under the bridge. I can probably—" "You will sleep here," Nancy said firmly. She got up and led him to a little cot covered with fresh flannel sheets, a homemade quilt of many squares and colors, and an inviting pillow in a clean white slip.

Astounded, John lay across the cot, burying his head in a pillow for the first time in weeks. A sudden gust of wind blew outside as rain spattered against a window pane. He shivered. "If you need anything,

just—“ “But why, Miss Jacobsen? Why are you being so kind to me?” Nancy explained that she believed in helping the poor; it was part of her religion. “And I, well, I’ve been noticing you the last few days down at the soup wagon,” she said, blushing slightly. “I feel you have potential.” “What—“ “Don’t worry, John,” she interrupted. “Just do something for someone else someday. That’s all you have to do to repay me.” She turned to go. “I will,” he whispered.

Nancy Jacobsen’s parents had left their home in Odense, Denmark to come to America in the 1870’s, settling in Portland, Oregon. Their daughter was born in the new country and eventually became a registered nurse. Raised in the Danish Evangelical Reformed Church, Nancy viewed her profession through deeply spiritual eyes. By taking John into her home and nursing him back to health, Nancy was living her religion, but also shaping John’s future. After returning home from her nursing duties each day, Nancy would feed John and talk to him in a soothing manner, assuring him he would get well. She liked to charm him with stories of Christmas in Denmark which her mother had told her, of how the family member who found an almond in the dessert on Christmas Eve received a special gift. On each of the Sundays leading up to Christmas Eve, an Advent wreath was brought out and each of its four candles were lit by the children. In Denmark Santa Claus not only arrived in a sleigh pulled by reindeer but was aided in distributing his presents by tiny elves.

After the Christmas season of 1904 was over and John was feeling better, he promised Nancy he would follow her example. He caught a freight train and headed back to his home in Iowa. For the rest of his life he would say of her, “She taught me what life is all about.” When John’s son, Tom Weber, met Nancy in the mid-1950s, she was old and frail but still had that wonderful smile elderly Scandinavian people so often have.

Inspired by what Nancy had done for him, John Weber attended Loyola Medical School in Chicago, working his way through school by loading freight trains at the LaSalle Street Station. After graduating in 1917, he became a medical doctor in Per, Indiana and then in Wyoming. His first wife Marguerite died of typhoid fever in 1922 and John moved on to Graingeville, Idaho, which lay amidst a beautiful farming region called Camas Prairie. In the following fifty-four years, he touched the lives of many patients for good in the wilds of Idaho, from the Salmon River valley to the Bitterroot mountain range. They

often lived in very primitive, remote circumstances and Dr. Weber often refused payment for his services. He got his nickname, "The Christmas Doctor," from one typically selfless act of service.

On Christmas Eve 1927, Dr. Weber made a difficult horseback ride to see a critically ill patient, Marie Qualey. Immigrants from Norway, the Qualey family lived in a location on the side of Snake River Canyon that was so steep folks sometimes said, "When they say, 'Drop in,' they really mean it." They made their living fashioning riding equipment, such as saddles, bridles, and spurs. Marie Qualey had been ill and coughing up blood, so despite the frigid weather (nine degrees below zero when they set out at three in the afternoon) and the holiday, Dr. Weber made the twenty-five mile trek up to the Qualey cabin. Guided by a local teenager, Muggs Bentley, Dr. Weber crossed the Salmon river and headed up the steep canyon. At times, the route was extremely abrupt and slippery, forcing the horses to climb in a series of leaps so violent the men had to cling to their necks to stay in the saddle. They arrived at the Qualey ranch about midnight.

Mrs. Qualey complained of coughing up blood and not being able to sleep at night because of her horrible nightmares of impending death. Still, behind her troubled expression lay a hint of someone who had known joy, hope—even fun. The doctor pulled the stethoscope from his bag, listened carefully to her heart and lungs. Marie began to feel a little better and got to reminiscing. One of her young sons scampered over and sat on the bed beside his mother. "I love my children so much," she said with a thick Norwegian accent, hugging the child. "We lost a little boy three years ago. Oh, children, they're so sweet! It's terrible to lose one, Dr. Weber, you just don't know." Mrs. Qualey didn't know that Dr. Weber had lost a son in infancy.

At Christmas dinner, Dr. Weber sat at the table, trying to hide the sorrow he felt, knowing this would be the last Christmas the Qualeys would spend together. He would have to tell them the truth. He got up, motioned Olaf Qualey aside, and admitted there was nothing he could do for Marie. The tuberculosis would soon kill her. There was a little hospital for such patients about thirty miles to the north, but Mrs. Qualey would have to be hauled out on a stretcher, and he did not believe she could survive the ordeal. All he could do was leave a bottle of pills that offered a little symptomatic relief. Olaf buried his withered face in his arms for a few minutes and sobbed bitterly. But

eventually he recovered his composure and the two men returned to their places at the table.

As the Qualeys, Muggs, and Dr. Weber ate, Olaf forced a slight smile and asked if each of his children would tell the visitors a little about Christmas in Norway. A slender boy of twelve or thirteen said that people there adhered strictly to the tradition that passersby, regardless of age or social station, must stop in at every house along the way and partake of food and drink. Ingrid, one of the beautiful teenage Qualey daughters, was dressed in a colorful folk dress from her native land. She told of how, after supper on Christmas Eve, the closed doors which had been hiding the main Christmas tree from the children were suddenly thrown open, with the glittering tree revealed in all its splendor. It was said that, as the Christmas tree filled the room with light, so the star of old shone forth and made the whole world light. The top of the Norwegian Christmas tree was decorated by placing three candles, representing the Three Wise Men, on it. It was believed that the rays of candlelight from the tree bestowed a blessing on whatsoever they gleamed. With this notion in mind, clothes, food, and other objects were placed so that the candles would cast their rays on them. And, before retiring on Christmas Eve, the shoes of all the household were placed in a row as a symbol that the entire family would live peacefully together during the coming year.

Dr. Weber noticed that, in all that was said by the members of the Qualey family, there was no mention of their very trying voyage to America, nothing about their difficult journey from the East Coast to Idaho, not a word about their wearisome struggle to survive here on the cold banks of the Snake River. These folks were typical American pioneers: long on hope and hard work, very short on excuses or self-pity.

When the meal was finished and all the Christmas stories had been told, at about two-thirty in the morning, Dr. Weber and Muggs started the long trek back. Olaf Qualey solemnly pressed a dollar bill into Dr. Weber's hand. The paper was well-worn. The two men mounted their horses and started out for the rocky, snowy canyons as heavy fog reached out to embrace them. Foam froze to the horses' bridles as they trotted over the rugged terrain. The so-called passes were nearly impassable because of deep snow. The horses broke through the crust of snow at times and coyotes howled around them.

It was eleven in the morning when they rode across the Salmon River Bridge just outside Whitebird, creatures of ice, at one with the winter.

At the side of the road sat a humble little cottage. On the chimney hung a sign written in a child's handwriting, "SANTA, PLEASE STOP HERE." "Do you suppose there really is a Santa Claus, Dr. Weber?" asked Muggs. The doctor's response surprised the young horseman. "Oh, you know the old saying, Muggs. 'Yes, Virginia, there really is a Santa Claus. Just as surely as love and generosity and devotion exist, he exists. What a dreary world it would be without Santa!'" As they rode into town, they heard the muffled sound of an organ from a nearby church and a choir burst into "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen." Dr. Weber returned the horses to the stables and found his car, which he and Muggs were able to start with the help of some wood alcohol. As he was about to drive off, Dr. Weber pressed the dollar bill into Muggs' hand. "Merry Christmas, Muggs," he said. Then the car rolled away into the patches of fog and headed up the precarious ice of Whitebird Hill toward Grangeville.

Muggs shuffled into his house and fell across his bed, sleeping until evening. His mother, Julia Bentley, went into the bedroom and coaxed him into joining the family for what remained of Christmas dinner. "Well, how did the trip go last night, son?" asked his father, Ernest. Munching a turkey leg, Muggs said, "Well, it was a cold, tough ride, but we made it." "Is Mrs. Qualey going to be all right?" asked Julia. "Oh, no," replied Muggs. "Dr. Weber says she has tuberculosis and it's far advanced. She won't live long." "The thing I can't understand," said Ernest, shaking his head, "is why Dr. Weber went out there at all. He must have known that with Mrs. Qualey coughing up blood the way she was, there was nothing he could do. And everybody knows those people don't have any money. Why on earth would he go to all that trouble just to see a hopeless case?"

"Yeah, I wondered about that too, Dad," Muggs said. He finished the drumstick and set it on his plate. He stepped to the window and gazed out, thinking about how Dr. Weber had made several difficult trips to his sweetheart, Jettie Lydia's home, to care for her when she had been ill one winter, and she had pulled through. But the bitter ride he and the doctor had made the night before was altogether different. He shivered at the thought. Why had they gone out there, freezing their tails off, risking their necks the way they did? Mrs. Qualey was simply too old and sick to recover.

Muggs yawned and dozed off. When he awoke, the house was quiet, but there was a light in the study. His large bare feet pattered their way across the kitchen floor. Shyly, he leaned in the doorway to see who was there. "Oh, hi, Muggs," his father said, putting aside the book he was reading. "What can I help you with?" "Dad, I've been thinking," Muggs said. "Seems to me Dr. Weber just wanted to say, 'Mrs. Qualey, someone cares.'"

Marie Qualey died three weeks after the two men's trip to see her on Christmas Eve. Dr. Weber continued practicing medicine in rural Idaho into his eighties. As late as 1968, when Dr. Weber was eighty years old, he got a phone call in the middle of night about a derelict man in a flophouse who was very ill. He pulled on his clothes, checked to see that he had what he needed in his bag, and threw on his overcoat. He didn't get home until nine in the morning. His wife asked where he had been all night. "Well, I got there," he said, "and I could see the old fellow wasn't going to make it through the night. I didn't want him to have to be alone when he died, so I stayed there with him."

Thanks to Nancy Jacobsen's faith, both in God and in John Weber's potential, the Christmas doctor was able to save many other people's lives and ease the suffering of many others. If you would like to read more about him, my book, *The Christmas Doctor. The True Story of Dr. J.P. Weber*, by Tom Weber (AuthorHouse, 2013), contains more stories of his life and deeds of service.