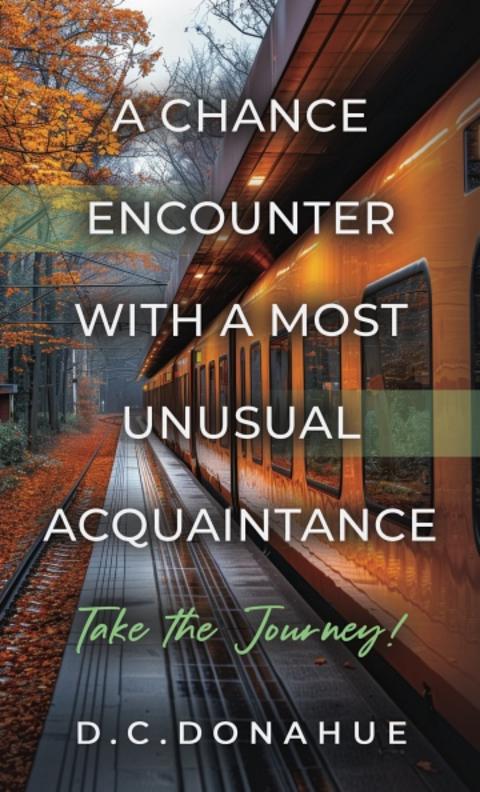


Join us in this delightful journey as our family, perhaps one just like yours, gets caught in spending the holiday season with A Most Unusual Acquaintance. I'll let you be the judge!

A Chance Encounter With a Most Unusual Acquaintance By D. C. Donahue

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First Edition

so much where it would take me, but more of where it could take me.

George Bailey was right in It's a Wonderful Life when he said, "Uncle Billy, do you know what the three greatest sounds are in the world?"

Uncle Billy replied, "Breakfast is served, lunch is served, dinner is served?"

George, all the while shaking his head, replies, "Nope, nope, nope...plane engines, boat horns, and train whistles! They speak of unknown journeys and adventures. I want to see it all!" Of course, most of us know how that story ends.

Now with the train approaching, I edged a little closer in positioning myself as to where one of the car doors would be when it stopped. It wasn't until then that an older gentleman stepped out of the station house and sidled up next to me. I couldn't help but note how old-fashioned his attire was, like a throwback from a different era. Wearing a herringbone coat with a matching brimmed hat, the kind with the feather tucked in the side band, reminding me of the ones my father used to wear.

He sported a pair of wire-framed glasses and had a pleasant face with a neatly trimmed beard and mustache. Underneath his coat was a hunter-green vest with a matching bow tie and a gold watch fob running from one of the unique brass buttons into his vest pocket. What caught my eye was his walking stick, made perhaps of cherry or mahogany, with a brass lion's head handle and matching tip.

I must have had a startled look on my face as he glanced up, asking, "Is everything okay and in order?" Thank goodness the train stopped, and luckily for me, the door was right in front of us.

Shaking my head and a little red-faced, I said, "Just admiring how well-dressed you are. Something about it reminds me of my dad, who passed away some years ago."

He said, "My good fellow, I am sorry to hear that, but I am sure he was a fine man."

I smiled politely, gesturing for him to go first. He sat in one of the seats in front of me. I was halfway back on the other side of the aisle. I remember thinking before the conductor gave the all-clear, why hadn't I noticed him sooner? It struck me as odd, as one who is usually more in tune with my surroundings.

It wasn't long after I found my seat that I was lost in the rocking, humming motion as we sped toward our next stop. Suburban life quickly morphed into urban life as the ever-changing scenery passed by my window. We entered the subway towards Center City. When we emerged on the other side of the Schuylkill River, the view changed to huge buildings, some adorned with large murals of William Penn and Ben Franklin as we drew near our downtown destination.

Arriving at Jefferson Station, I stepped off the train, headed up the escalator towards the Reading Terminal, and then towards the Broad Street exit. The wall along the escalator leading up to street level featured a full-size mural of historical figures and landmarks from the city's history. SEPTA (Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority), in past years, had a large model train display set up in the upper concourse. Primarily designed for children, the platform allowed them to walk around, pressing small round doorbells that activated various features, such as lights or moving elements on the platform.

Stepping now onto Broad Street, a performer was doing a Temptations medley. He was pretty good, and he certainly had the moves down. So, after listening for a while, I tossed a few dollars into his tip hat and started towards Macy's just as he broke into, "I got sunshine on a cloudy day, and when it's cold outside, I got the month of May."

Continuing in the direction of City Hall, I crossed the street just past the Hard Rock Café. Lunch there with the grandkids was part of our tradition.

The window displays at Macy's are admired by both young and old for their artistic, holiday-themed displays. Our oldest granddaughter, Sommer, a second-year photography student, would want to capture the different themes. She would also be able to get some great shots of our fair city's architecture, along with family members or whatever else appeals to her artistic eye. Approaching Macy's and jamming a few dollars into the Salvation

Army kettle, I stepped inside. Besides trying to hawk my book, I was also checking holiday events and times for our Saturday return, so this was a recon mission.

I knew from past years that the Dickens Village Display, as well as the business offices, were located on the third floor. Walking through the courtyard, I passed the iconic Brass Eagle, which keeps watch like a sentry from its granite perch in the center court.

The Holiday Light Show ran about every two hours, so I had well over an hour to kill before the next. I was also going to run down to the Comcast Center later in the afternoon to check out their Holiday Extravaganza. They put on a virtual reality show projected on a large wall of the courtyard entrance. It depicts scenes conducted by the Philadelphia Pops Orchestra with holiday-themed Victorian-era strollers along Elfreth's Alley, the oldest and most iconic continuously occupied street in Colonial America. The display featured ice skaters dancing with Penguins and other animals. At the end of the show, snowmen mounted high on either side blow artificial snow, which the kids all love to catch.

Philadelphia is a unique holiday experience for anyone who takes the time to visit our historic city.

Arriving at the office and being greeted by the receptionist, who cordially told me everyone was either out to lunch or in a meeting. I left an information packet, asking her to please ensure the Holiday Marketing Manager sees the material. It was apparent she fielded these kinds of

inquiries, but one could only hope to get a phone call. I did manage to speak with one of the managers in the Christmas department. The room was set up with cattle chute lanes to control the line of visitors to get into the Dickens Village display on busy days. The end of the tour had an area to get goods, ornaments, and, more importantly, pictures with Santa!

It was still early, and being a weekday was an exception, as I was able to walk right into the Village tour. However, Saturday would be a much different story. Leaving a short time later, I could not help but admire the architecture of City Hall, which sits across the street. You can enter the courtyard by any of the four corner entrances of the building. It now hosts the Christmas Village Market, along with all its offerings. Passing over to the other side into Dilworth Plaza, you will find the recently set-up ice rink, which draws skaters, admirers, and gawkers who enjoy the laughter of the near slips and falls.

My mission was almost completed, leaving me just enough time to make it back to Macy's for the next show. No trip downtown is complete without stopping at the Reading Terminal. There, I get the most coveted of all lunches, a hot roast pork sandwich from Dinic's. It comes with your choice of toppings on a fabulous Philly-style roll, a meal in itself. As I entered the terminal, it seemed even more crowded than usual. The smell of the different food vendor offerings would make your mouth water. You never know what you'll find, especially during the

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holidays, but it is well worth the trip and never disappoints.

Usually, in the back center eating area, a piano is kept on display for anyone so inclined to tickle the keys and share their talents. Today was no exception, as a variety of visitors saddled up to the piano and entertained the group with lively holiday tunes. Time passed as I waited in line to order my lunch while being entertained by the sights and sounds of the holiday season. If you like good food, unique shops, and people-watching, the Reading Terminal is a great place any time of year.

~ Chapter 2: A Chance Meeting and Introductions ~

A short time later, sandwich in hand, I spotted a young couple sitting at a table for two in the food court. They must have seen me walking with a slight limp and motioned for me to take their table. They were very kind, and I couldn't thank them enough. Picking up my roast pork sandwich and taking a bite, my taste buds exploded as the juice trickled down through my beard.

I scrambled to grab more napkins and, looking up, heard a voice saying, "Excuse me, do you mind if I join you?" I found myself staring into the face of the older, well-dressed gentleman from the train station.

A little startled, I gestured for him to sit, for which he was thankful. He said, "Ah! It feels good to get off my feet." In making conversation, I asked if he had time to grab lunch, but he shook his head no. I took another bite. He laughed and continued to say, "I was traveling from Washington D.C. to Philly, then to New York City, and was eventually supposed to wind up in Boston, or at least that was my holiday plan. Take in some sights, meet up with old friends." He added, "At my age, that's saying something."

I said, "You don't look that old and certainly seem to get around well enough." He said, "You'd be surprised, as you can't always judge a book by its cover."

Taking another bite, I asked, "You stated you eventually were supposed to head on to New York City and Boston

as if in the past tense. So, what made you change your plans, if you don't mind me asking?"

As I took another bite from my sandwich, he said, "Ah! So, you were listening, and it is very kind of you to notice. I encountered a dilemma somewhere between Washington, D.C., and here. I have somehow misplaced my wallet.

I replied, "I am sorry to hear that. Can I get you a sandwich, my treat?"

Smiling, he said, "If you don't mind, I will take you up on your offer, as whatever you're having looks delicious, and I'm hungrier than I thought.

"You see, I travel the world extensively and have always found that the locals know the best cuisine. You know what they say? When in Rome, do as the Romans do!"

I said, "We are going there with friends next year for a long-awaited vacation." I then briefly excused myself, disappearing into the crowd, showing up a short time later with a sandwich and drink in hand.

He said, "I must insist that you take half of the hot sandwich, and I'll take the other half of your now warm sandwich, as it only seems fair."

My mood lightened at this gesture. It wasn't long before we were both lost in conversation. He politely asked about my family while mingling with some stories of his own. He wasn't kidding, as he saw much of what the world had to offer. We laughed and spoke of many things, sharing stories as we ate. The minutes seemed to melt into hours. Suddenly aware of the time, we hadn't addressed the elephant in the room. Where would he stay? How would he eat? Just how old was he? Would he be okay?

He looked at me, smiling as he slid back in his chair and said, "I know what you're thinking! Let me put your mind at ease regarding my welfare. I called ahead to book my room before departing Washington on Saturday. I carried cash in a money belt that was mostly left in the hotel room safe. So, I'm not broke, but I need to be more cautious about my spending. However, I am in your debt for a fine lunch, your company, and your hospitality. I plan to get my financial situation straightened out by Saturday.

"If I am not mistaken, you said you were coming back down on Saturday with the family?"

I quickly answered, "Yes!"

He replied, "Well, I'd like to insist on making this up to you and getting a chance to meet them if that's okay with you. If you have another moment, I'd like to explain and share a little of my story. "I find great joy and happiness looking into the faces of families and friends out and about in my travels, especially at this time of the year. It seems to bring out the best in them."

We hope you have enjoyed our story and look forward to hearing from you on any of the Social Media sites below!

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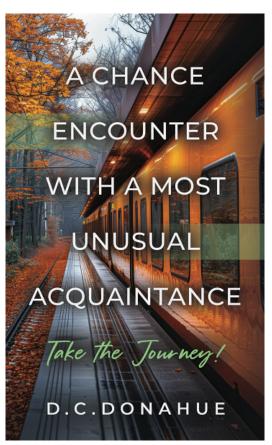
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