

MR. BIG'S CHRISTMAS

"Damn it, Casey, I wish Christmas was over and done. Bring on January, and business as usual. Out with the tinsel and turkey bones. Back to old clothes and porridge. The sooner the better."

W. Ballard Bigelow II deliberately strokes off the month of December on his calendar. Then he points his finger across his wide mahogany desk.

"There are burdens enough in life, Casey. I don't need Christmas too. And I resent the social pressure to participate. Anyone who wants something special should go out and buy it for himself. Isn't that the most sensible way? Personally, I feel presumptuous giving gifts to others. And embarrassed when they're given to me. Besides, the more wealth I accumulate, the less material goods mean to me. My wife would have called it an age thing. But collecting stuff has gotten to be a nuisance."

Without turning, he jerks his thumb over his shoulder at the enormous portrait hanging behind him. A ponderous oil painting of a stern-countenanced gentleman, looming over the room from his superior vantage point on the wall. Underneath, a plaque states - 'William B. Bigelow I - Founder and Chairman of Mr. Big Enterprises'. The features of the face in the picture are similar to his own, and the shrewd dark eyes are identical.

"My old man was one sharp cookie," says Mr. Big the younger. "He always claimed that wisdom was more important than possessions. Do you remember him saying that, Casey? I never believed him at the time. Especially because he was so well off. And back then I thought I was smarter than he was. But he was right. Because he also knew what wisdom was. Which proves he was a pretty wise guy."

"One day he told me, 'Son, life's toughest choices aren't between good and bad, right and wrong, or true and false. Those decisions are easy. Any schoolboy's been drilled on how to deal with them. The trickiest problems involve figuring out what's right from what's good and what's true. Which can be three very different things. If you can tell the difference, you'll be a wise man. If you can choose correctly, you'll be a genius. And for anyone with that level of intelligence,' my father said, 'the possessions just take care of themselves.'"

Mr. Big regards his assistant.

"You look puzzled, Casey. So I'll give you an example of how good, right and true can be different. Remember every Christmas, I'd get you to send my brother-in-law a box of Cuban cigars? Right up until he died of lung cancer. Obviously a bad gift. It helped kill him. I could have given him a good present. Like ... a pair of pajamas. But he wouldn't have appreciated them in the same way as he loved those stogies. Or I could have sent him nothing. Which is what I thought the free-loading bastard truly deserved. So though they were bad for his health and false to my principles, those cigars were still the right gift. They kept him happy and fulfilled my Christmas obligations. Does that explanation help?"

Mr. Big opens his brief case and pulls out several pieces of paper. He studies them for a moment and continues.

"The last order of business before I leave is my four children. They're all fine people, as you know, Casey. Just not my kind of people. None of them are interested in the family business.

And not one of them ever paid attention when I tried to pass on my father's wisdom. Hell, they don't even like each other. But my wife would have wanted me to give them Christmas presents anyway. God I miss her. And I'm performing my Christmas duties for her sake only. But I also intend to take full advantage of the opportunity to further my own purposes. Therefore, if gifts must be given, they'll be awarded on my terms."

Mr. Big pauses, and glances again at the pages in his hand.

"I've written a letter to the four of them, Casey, which I'm going to read while you make a video. Call it an object lesson in wisdom and co-operation. Let's see if anything comes of it. Although I don't have high expectations. When you're done filming me you can send the movie to all of my kids electronically. Now I'll wait for you to set up the camera so I can start.

In a few minutes the equipment is in place, and Mr. Big commences to read in a dry tone.

My Dear Children:

I realize the above greeting is more conventional than accurate, as you are no longer children, and we've never been particularly dear to one another. But that aside, let me sincerely wish you and your families a pleasant holiday season. I'm sure you're all aware of how uncomfortable I am with Christmas, and perhaps are somewhat surprised to hear from me at all. You might be even more shocked to learn that I'm writing regarding Christmas presents. But before you get your hopes up. Remember. Beware of Scrooge bearing gifts.

For many rich fathers with three sons and a daughter, Christmas must surely be a joyous celebration of extravagant giving. But we haven't been a closely knit family, and none of you has ever gone out of your way to win my favour. So for my part, I feel no warm Yuletide compulsion to share my wealth with you.

For instance, Bill, you have consistently spurned my advice and offers of support from Mr. Big Enterprises for your struggling construction company. Your independent stand has unquestionably worked against your desire to expand the business. Not to mention your ability to afford those high-speed playthings you love so well. But to tell the truth, I might have taken a similar position if our roles were reversed. Perhaps we just make better rivals than friends.

And Bobby, I wonder if you will ever settle down to anything. I simply can't understand your infatuation with what you call music, and your crisis-to-crisis existence has always made me impatient. You've devoted your life to the never ending pursuit of easy money schemes. Each one more disastrous than the last. In fact, I've never taken you seriously since that night you called from Las Vegas.

Now Barbara, you've retreated into your little suburban world, immersing yourself in your children's activities, love stories and rummage sales. Whatever happened to the eager young girl who once longed to be an opera star? You now seem to survive vicariously through the passions and pursuits of others. If I were so inclined, I could feel hurt that your home life engrosses all of your attention, leaving no time for me. Except for my greater frustration over having raised a daughter with such petty interests.

Finally, Bruce, because of your ridiculous social notions, your political crusades and my business ventures have been clashing for years. The tiresome causes you espouse are irritating enough in

themselves. But when coupled with your self-righteous, in-your-face attitude, they become downright obnoxious. You know I would rather see one of my competitors triumph, than witness the success of any of your so-called reforms.

But in the final analysis, you are all my children, and if nothing else, a conduit in the Bigelow family lineage. So, on that basis I have decided to provide each of you with a modestly generous gift this Christmas.

First, to you, Bobby, I give your late mother's Steinway piano, in the hope that through it, you may discover what real music is all about. For professional training, which I highly recommend, I believe Barbara, who has always admired the instrument could be of help.

Next, Barbara, you are to have my Piper Cub twin-engine airplane. Please use it to explore all those exotic places you read about in your romance novels. For advice on how to become an aviatrix, you might consult Bill. I gave him his first flying lesson myself.

Now Bill, I was once forced to take in trade ten thousand acres of land in Labrador. To me it's just wild country, a misfit in my real estate portfolio, and I've never laid eyes on it. But I'm confident that with your skills and aspirations as a developer, you will make it prosper. However, I must warn you that the logging rights have been revoked, as the area is involved in both an environmental assessment and a native land claim dispute. Should you require more details, I'm sure that Bruce, who is an expert on such issues, can fill you in.

Lastly, Bruce, I award you the mount of your choice from my racing stables. Except for Big Apple, of course. With your strict animal rights convictions, I trust you'll give the horse you pick a good home. And if by chance you overcome your anti-gambling sentiments and get the urge to enter it in a race, your brother Bobby could tell you all you need to know.

I strongly recommend that you all make the most of my bounty, as it is very likely a once-in-a-lifetime offer. Depending on your point of view, you may regard these endowments as the spiteful stings of an irascible curmudgeon, or as golden opportunities sent by Santa Claus to expand your horizons. The interpretation of my philanthropy is up to you. I only ask that you give me nothing in return.

By the time you receive this letter, I'll be heading to my villa in the south of France for the duration of December. To make the necessary arrangements for taking possession of your presents, please contact Casey, who will be at your service.

Enjoy your gifts. And may the coming year be a satisfying and prosperous one.

As always, I remain your indulgent father.

Mr. Big rests his hands on his desk and stares at the camera as the filming ends.

"Send it out as soon as you can, Casey. Then we'll watch what happens." He shuts his briefcase and sits back in his chair.

"It's really a no-brainer, Casey. But my kids are all too smart to figure that out. Can you see them taking my supposedly wrong gifts, and swapping them round till they come out right? Not likely. They'll end up in a mess instead. Their personalities are so diverse, they'll have a hell of a time

working together and sorting things through. They always have. Barbara, the just-a-housewife, forever tries to do good, even when it goes past the point of being right. So she eventually gets on everybody's nerves. Bill, the solo-flying-contractor, often does what's right in his limited field, but is too free-spirited to care about influencing the rest. Bruce, the tree-hugging-activist, always remains true to his impractical ideals, and resents anyone who doesn't support his causes. Which is everyone but himself. And as for superstar-in-his-own-mind Bobby. Well, he still has trouble telling right from not-so-right."

Mr. Big shakes his head.

"If that group can come to a consensus, Casey, God bless them. But if they just try for once, and some lasting sibling relationships develop from the process, then my gifts will have accomplished their task. And who knows? A couple of my children could even acquire a bit of wisdom along the way."

Rising from his seat, he looks at his watch.

"Well, Casey, you have some electronic messages to send off. And I've got a plane to catch. Call me at the villa if anything comes up. And have a good holiday yourself."

Left alone in his inner sanctum, Mr. Big turns to the silent figure of his father staring down at him. For a second, the eyes in the painting seemed to lock with his in a twinkle of complicity. Mr. Big smiles.

"Father, did I ever tell you that you were a pompous old ass? I hope I did, at least once. And I hope my kids tell me to stick my god damn gifts where the sun never shines."

Reaching up, he gently pokes his father's prominent nose.

"Merry Christmas, you pompous old ass," he whispers.

Then Mr. Big turns off the lights and leaves his office.

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