

The Waiting Room

By Ted LaFemina

Once upon a time, there was a man, Joe, who didn't have much, but worked hard for a living and always found a way to serve those around him. Sometimes simply by lending a shoulder to cry on, other times by helping mentor young men starting out in life, and often with a few extra dollars added to the collection plate when there was a special need. Joe was weary and had been ill for some time when, late one cold Christmas Eve, his body finally gave out and he slipped off into that timeless slumber that marks the passage from this world into the next.

Joe found himself in what appeared to be a long waiting room and he immediately felt young and whole again. The aches and pains of his long illness were gone, replaced by feelings of strength and vigor. He held out his hands and found them clean and unscathed. The calluses and scars from the hard work of his life were gone and, when he looked down, he found he was dressed in a clean white robe, long and beautiful, that flowed behind him like the cape of an emperor. Looking up he saw to his right a soft white bench, plush and comfortable and, without knowing what else to do, he sat down and waited to see what would happen next.

The room seemed large and the whiteness at first made it hard to see. As his eyes began to adjust to the light he noticed, at the far end of the room, a large white door with a golden doorknob and soft warm light filtering through its large stained glass window. The colored light of the window danced across the far end of the waiting room floor. The room was warm and comfortable and Joe marveled at the light—"truly beautiful" he said to himself.

It was then that he noticed a motion on the far side of the room across from him. With wondering about the door and marveling at the stained glass light, he hadn't really examined the remainder of the room.

He looked up but still found it difficult to see. Squinting his eyes a bit, he again saw some small motion on the far side of the room. Joe got up from his comfortable seat and began to walk across the waiting room. As he did so, the air around him felt cooler, not cold, but enough to cause a shiver to run up his spine. There on the other side of the room sat another man; the bench this man sat upon was made of hard wood, his clothes were unkempt, and his hands and face were dirty. Joe called out to the man but he didn't seem to hear, instead the man slowly lifted his head to look down at the far end of his side of the room. Joe followed his gaze and found there another door, not white and gleaming like his own, but made of old splintered wood with only a few remnants of ancient paint peels still clinging to its surface.

Joe continued walking over to the man and took his hand into his own. The man at first started to pull away, but then relaxed and looked up. His eyes were drawn and full of sorrow, the look in those eyes and the dirt on his face cut Joe to the bone, and so he reached down and ripped off a few inches from the bottom of his own robe and began to wipe the dirt off the man's face and then his hands. As he finished cleaning the man, he looked and saw a tear roll down the now clear face. Moved with a spirit filled heart, Joe lifted the man by the hand and gave him a long, gentle bear hug and, with a few kind words, walked the man over to the soft white bench on his side of the room. No sooner had they both sat down, though, that Joe looked and saw another figure seated on the hard bench: this time, a young man, if you could call him that, from the looks of it not more than seventeen. This young man was also dirty, and it was hard to tell if he looked more scared or more lonely. As before, Joe got up and walked across the room and, again, filled with compassion, tore another few inches from the bottom of his robe and began to wipe away the dirt and with a few soft words, eased the young man's fears.

As Joe was busy cleaning the dirt off the young man, a brilliant light shone from behind him; the light was intense and he could feel its warmth across his back. Joe turned to find the source of the light and, when he did so, he could just make out the figure of the first man walking through the white door with the stained glass window. In a moment, the man was across the threshold and the door closed but, as it did, Joe experienced the most amazing flow of joy and life spread throughout every fiber of his being.

Joe turned back to the young man, finished cleaning the last spot of dirt from his cheeks and, as he did for the first man, gave him a big warm hug and brought him over to the white cushioned seat on his side of the room.

After Joe seated the man, he turned back to the hard wooden bench. Joe half expected to see a new occupant appear, but was surprised to see that his expectation was only half correct. There on the hard bench were two men. Like the others, these men were dressed poorly, looking tired and dirty. One appeared to be an older man, eighty or so as Joe judged it, the other man appeared to be his own age.

Joe looked back to the young man he had just cleaned, gave him a warm smile and a quick squeeze on the shoulder, and walked over to one of the men on the wooden bench. Joe bent down, tore yet another few inches from his white robe, and began to clean the dirt off the man. As he did so, he was startled to see someone appear at his side. The man was clean and neatly shaven and had the appearance of someone who had just stepped out of a shower, for the man still had a towel wrapped around his waist. This newcomer smiled warmly at Joe, and with a second towel he had in his hand, began to help Joe clean the dirt off the two men seated on the bench. As he did so, Joe, for the second time, saw brilliant light from behind accompanied by its warmth on his back and the rush of joy in his spirit. He glanced

over his shoulder just in time to see the young man step through the door with the stained glass window.

The two of them spent the remainder of the afternoon cleaning newcomers on the worn bench and moving them to the soft white seats and, each time, the cleaned men would disappear through the white door with the stained glass window. Finally, at what felt like the end of a long day, Joe turned back toward the wooden bench and, for the first time, found them empty. He hadn't had a chance to talk with his helper since he arrived and so Joe turned to finally introduce himself but, as he did so, he found the man looking right at him. This man was young, about thirty or so, with a sparkle in his eye and a smirk across his mouth. The smirk quickly gave way to loud hearty laughing, not mean laughing, but laughing like that shared between two old friends. The man lifted his finger and pointed at the bottom of Joe's robe. Joe stared down at what once was a long beautiful robe but now more resembled a night shirt hanging well above his knobby knees. "Good thing the bench is empty," his helper said, "I'm not sure you could spare another few inches." Joe felt ridiculous as he looked back up to meet his helper's gaze, but the ridiculous feeling gave way to his own laughter. When they finally caught their breath this young helper stepped forward and grabbed Joe by the arm. "Hungry?" he said.

"Starved" replied Joe. "Then come and join me for dinner my good and faithful servant, I've had a seat waiting for you at my table for quite some time" the helper said as he led Joe forward to the white door with the stained glass window. "I believe you could also do with a new robe?" he added with a chuckle.

As they stepped arm-in-arm across the threshold of the great white door, the Lord turned to Joe and asked, "Care to join me again here tomorrow?"

"Wouldn't miss it."