

TO ALL, A GOOD NIGHT

I watched with keen interest as the old man's hand dug deep into his right pants pocket trying to find some money to feed the gas pump. With no luck, he shoved his left hand in the other pocket. A clutch of three one dollar bills came out this time. The look on his face, and the heavy sigh that took his shoulders up, then slowly down, told me it wasn't going to be enough. Undoubtedly feeling the chill of this December night through the many holes in his inappropriate winter clothing, he hurriedly fumbled around in the pockets of his well-worn war surplus Navy Pea coat. His weathered dry, cracked and slightly bleeding gnarled hands darted quickly into each torn pocket and coming back out again, empty.

With one forceful pull, he yanked open the door to his thirty-year-old plus sedan. The driver's door groaned with the sound of rusty hinges and stayed that way only so long as the old man's outstretched leg kept it there, propping it open. The entire car looked as if it were being

held together by vintage bumper stickers whose cause or purpose that was written on them was as expired as the inspection sticker on his windshield. As he became aware of me waiting in line behind him, the embodiment of a Charles Dickens work revealed itself to me in plain sight as he rummaged even more quickly, searching frantically inside his car for a little extra to satisfy his gas tank.

It was Christmas Eve. I knew why I was here; to fill up before tomorrow's travels, for making the rounds on The Day. I wondered what his story might have been. Out of state plates, no money, down on his luck. It seemed to be a desperate, sad way to be spending the night before Christmas, to be spending *any* day or night, for that matter.

He walked through the entrance of the store, his three single pieces of currency in hand, approached the counter and paid the clerk in advance. As the old man turned his back to him and walked out, the clerk shook his head. He must have had the same thought I had. Or maybe he was thinking why he had to work on Christmas Eve – or both.

The man made his way back to his car and pumped the metered three dollars worth of not-much-mileage into it. When the pump clicked off, he held the hose up higher to get every last drop. I couldn't sit there and watch any longer.

"Hey," I said as I opened my door and got out. He looked startled, wariness and caution showed on his wrinkled face.

"I noticed your plates. You coming or going?"

"Going," he said as he replaced the pump handle firmly in the cradle. "Home. To see the family."

"You've got a ways to go, then. Driving straight through?"

"Yep." He nodded his head and took a step toward his door. "It's only a couple of hours. But I gotta get there before morning, ya know," he said grinning, and gave a strange sort of half smile, curving up only one side of his face. He pulled the door open to his ride.

"Yeah, sure, of course," I blurted out awkwardly. My words held him in place.

"You know, I was thinking. I noticed you didn't put a lot of gas in there. Is that going to be enough to get all the way home?"

He looked at me, expressionless. A long silence answered my question. I nodded understandingly, took out my wallet, swiped my card through the reader, and filled his tank. He just stood there looking at me. When I had finished, I took a step toward my car.

"I don't know what to say," he said. "Except...thanks."

"Hey, it's the time of year for giving, right?"

He nodded slowly, and kind of half grinned that strange grin again, got into his car not saying another word, and drove off.

"Merry Christmas!" I yelled, turning the pump on to fill my own car. I saw him stick his hand out his window and he gave a little wave as he pulled away into the darkness.

Just before dawn, about a mile from his family's home, the old man pulled off the main road and onto a familiar wooded trail. The car made its way back to a picnic area and did a full circle around a pavilion, turning it around and heading back the same way he came in. He applied the brakes, put it in Park and let it run.

It won't take long. Well, maybe a little longer this year.

The old man got out, the driver's door creaking, metal on metal, walked around to the back and lifted the lid on the trunk. One by one, he started carefully tearing the strange name tags off of the neatly wrapped presents of all different sizes and shapes. Sometimes he would shake a couple of them and try to guess what was inside. Amused as he was, he was always careful to make sure any pieces of broken, automobile safety glass was brushed aside. He didn't want anyone, especially the children, to hurt themselves, after all.

With that familiar thought, he got a kind of strange half curved smile on his face, as he thought about how he would say he didn't know which present was which when he gave them to his family. And he smiled even more when he thought about everyone laughing when they said they each got "someone else's present," because he "forgot to put the name tags on them – just like he did every year."