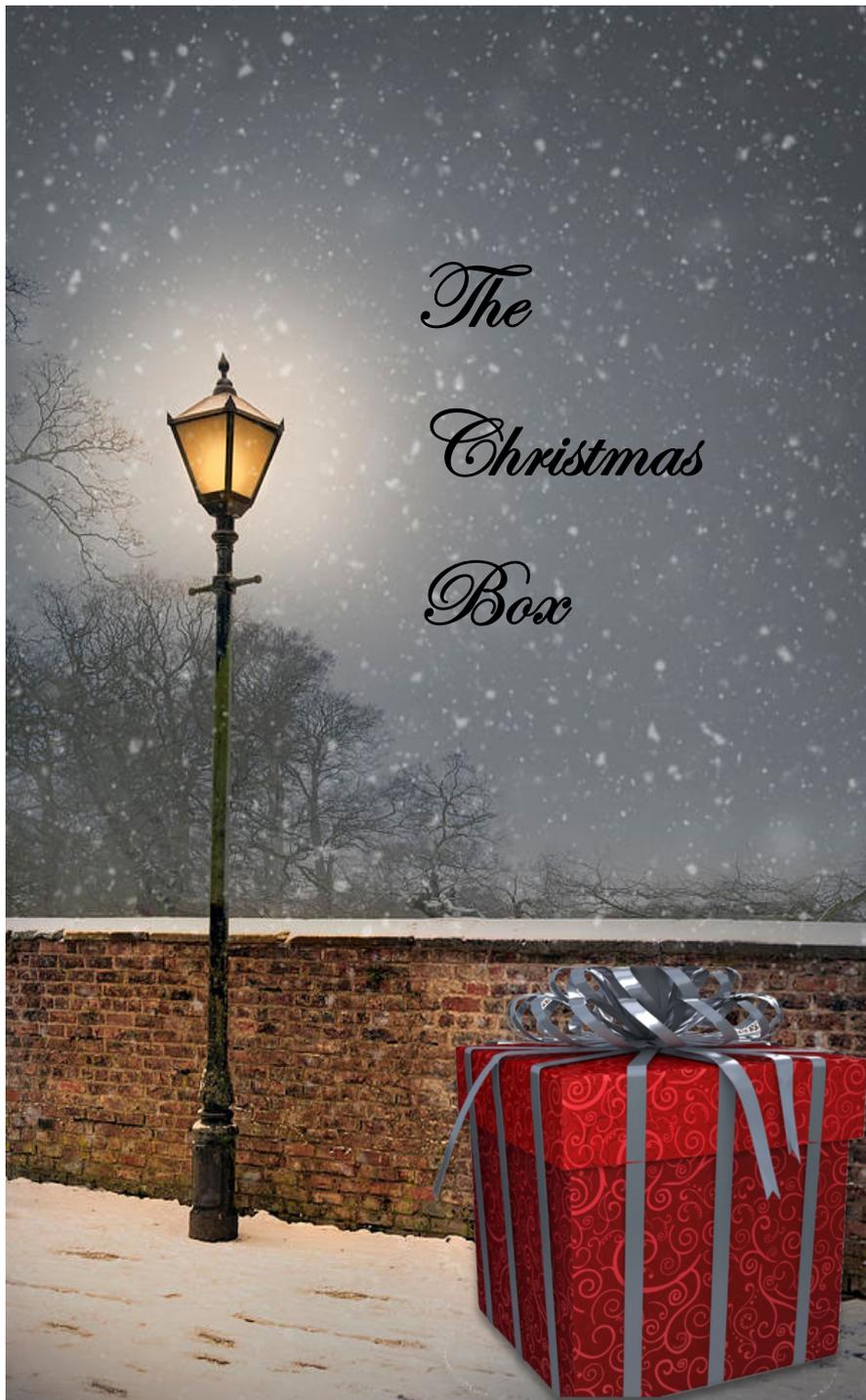


*The
Christmas
Box*





Merry Christmas 2019

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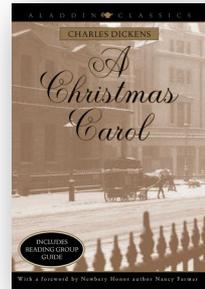




Chapter 1

Todd took the napkin off the table and wiped his mouth of any remaining residue from his breakfast. The local diner was playing the local news and weather on TV. They were switching to the national news. As usual the national news was headlined by the impeachment shenanigans going on in Washington D.C. Todd has no opinion one way or another about the issue itself. He was sure of one thing though. He was tired, just tired of hearing about it and anything else to do with overprivileged corruption, whether it be a man or woman.

Christmas was coming and it felt as if all the lessons learned from Charles Dickens were nothing more than speed bumps of history. Todd was a Dickens fan and *A Christmas Carol* was one of his favorite stories. The whole story had been about greed and privilege. *A Christmas Carol* highlighted the ills of selfish greed in the haunting of Marley's ghost. It was a morality tale for the ages meant to warn us of the ills of corruption or elevating personal economics ahead of character. Yet here we sit with a universally acknowledged narcissist as the compassionate center of our national holiday season.



“Thank God for Santa Claus.” Todd smiled as the last remarks filtered through his head. He was sure many; many Christians would take offense at the idea that the President or Santa Claus were the centers of the Christmas Season. He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders trying to shed himself of any ill feelings. He was going to have to find another diner to eat breakfast that didn't have local news blaring while he ate. He always





promised himself that, but that cinnamon roll was heaven, a great start to any day. Well that, and Miss Penny. He would miss her wink and smile. She also took time during the morning rush to chat with him. It wasn't much, but he enjoyed the attention.

Todd quickened his step as he looked at his watch. He was going to be late if he didn't speed up. He didn't want to lose this job, even if it was part time and paid basic wages. It was the first job he could get in his desired career of graphic design. When he began this path he, like many of his friends, expected high wages and plenty of



openings. No worries about finding a job. But, like everything else in the real world, the high wages and great job openings were for people with experience, lots of experience. He had to pay his dues and earn his place. He didn't mind, but the jobs for those needing to get experience

were far and few between.

He was lucky to get this graphic design job and knew it. Plus he loved the work. He also liked the company. He hoped he would earn a full-time position in a couple of months. Then he might be able to shed the afternoon delivery job. But so far he wasn't making any headway in impressing the boss. He worked hard on everything sent his way, nose to the grindstone as it were. But no feedback. Nothing he did seemed to make an impression. Todd appeared destined to be another in a long line of drones that would be tossed at any moment.

Still if he could make it in this graphic design job he might make enough to at least shed his third job, part-time actor. Well, not acting really. He played characters for a modeling company. He would attend parties, store openings, and things like that for a couple of extra bucks each week. He dressed up as a Prince once, then a gargyle at Halloween. Different things for different





events. He thought he might stay on though for the one he was playing now.

He was playing the first shift Santa at the local mall on Saturdays and Sundays. He liked it a lot. Sure he had to wear the whiskers and padding. All the running he did wasn't receptive to a large physic. But at those hours the kids and parents didn't really care. They just wanted a red hat, beard, and a soft lap to sit on for the family picture. He was in by 10 and out by 1. Three hours of happiness for \$25.00 an hour.



He was amazed though at the man that played the main shift. Worked six hours straight Monday through Sunday. Never missed a day. Always on time and did he ever look like Saint Nick. Even had his own costume. He was jolly and plump and had the beard and glasses. You'd swear it was the old man himself if you ever got to meet him. Todd liked him too. He always asked Todd about his work, what was happening in his life and Todd's future plans. It was nice to have someone to share with that seemed genuinely interested in his welfare.

Todd knew him as Nicholas. Just Nicholas. Never really got the rest of his name. But the first name fit so well it didn't seem the rest was important. Todd did ask one of the mall elves how long Nicholas had been working the mall, but no one really remembered when he began. He had always been there. He was a fixture. He had been there so long the children he first held in his lap were bringing kids of their own. Some were bringing grandkids.

But that small mystery could be solved later. Todd was heading into work and the sights and sounds enveloped him. He headed for his desk and dove in. He smiled at the disconnect between the designs he was working on and the season around him. By necessity the designs were always four to six months ahead of the season they were in. They couldn't put together a graphic





at the last minute. So he found himself working on a hot summer image while surrounded by Christmas decorations, music and even cold weather.

Of course that was the benefit of working in a graphic design business as well. They had the best holiday decorations. They needed to shine when customers came to call, and their decorations were part of their calling card. Large Christmas tree bulbs as big as Todd, shiny and grand sat in the hallways. More than one fantastically decorated Christmas tree was sprinkled around the offices. Large, beautifully designed posters of Jesus, Santa, mangers, and Christmas trees lined the walls. The place reeked of joy and good will to men.

It was one when his shift ended. Todd hated to leave. But you couldn't make a living at a part time job on a basic income, so he headed for the delivery truck. He started at 2 and ended somewhere around 8, although he couldn't be sure. The holidays meant lots of gifts and lots of deliveries, so time was fluid. The work was hard and the time demanding, but there were a few benefits. On many occasions there was the hefty tip or even a warm chocolate chip cookie. Now and then even a smile from a wide-eyed kid that had been waiting at the door for that special package. That alone could warm him up enough to overcome the dreaded cold.

Todd liked the smiles the best. They didn't put a lick of money in his pocket, but they did warm his soul. He felt he needed a bit of soul warming. The daily grind of making a living was putting a toll on his heart, hardening it against the world. He witnessed so many people stressing money, money, money. They seemed to take pride in how well the economy was doing based on some random numbers posted on a stock exchange. Something he nor



anybody he knew understood or participated. People and newscasters followed and agonized over those numbers

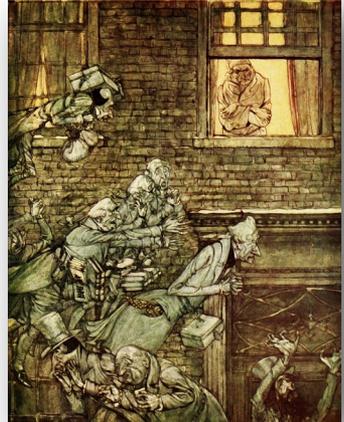




even though they didn't put one more penny in their pockets or add one more dime to their personal wealth.

In Todd's everyday world the stock market didn't matter. Whatever big money others were making sure wasn't translated to his life. High paying jobs and benefits weren't the reality. He, and almost everyone he knew had two, maybe three jobs or more just to make ends meet.

Worse was the selfishness and greed the current environment had spawned. Todd had witnessed more than one lost soul abandon his character to badger a poor innocent for a larger tip or steal a small package from their deliveries. When confronted, each man or woman would become small then growl how they "deserved it" or "to each his own". Guilt still etched across their faces.



Todd had to admit sometimes he had thought about crossing that line. Money was the goal wasn't it? Why did character count? You couldn't spend character. He watched as corporations lied, cheated and stole the money from the masses and got away with it. He saw how the rich preyed upon the poor and laughed.

He wondered why he shouldn't return a little to himself? Why not get his? Todd felt he was getting more bitter and angrier each day. As good as his job was, as much as he liked playing Santa, it seemed life wasn't playing fair. Maybe he was the victim here. Maybe he should do something about it. As each grinding day passed without advancement or hope these feelings fed at his soul. He had to fight to maintain control.

It was nine when he laid his head down in his bed after the deliveries. He was dog tired and cold inside. It was another hard day and it looked like it would be the same tomorrow. He had nothing but a whole 9 hours before it all started again, eight of which would be spent





trying to sleep while his frustrations simmered. Todd slammed his fist into his pillow to vent his irritations at the battle in his soul. Todd's head soon followed his fist onto the pillow, and he fell asleep. Anger drove his dreams until a deep darkness filled his mind.





Chapter 2

The chime tolled one. Todd started awake. His first thought was confusion. He didn't have a clock that chimed. His phone didn't chime, and he was no where near a church. His second thought was curiosity. He couldn't figure out the bright light illuminating his bedroom nor its source. He looked toward his dresser perched next to the door then let his gaze drop to the only chair in the room. It was sparse plastic and metal, suitable for hanging clothes and putting on shoes but little else. Miss Penny was sitting lightly on edge smiling at him. She radiated light.



Todd pulled the covers up a little tighter. He eschewed pajamas for a pair of boxers while sleeping. Miss Penny's presence was highlighting his absence of clothing in a somewhat embarrassing way.

"Hey, Miss Penny." Todd squeaked out the greeting. He decided to start off the conversation as uncomfortable as it was. It was better than a staring contest.

"Hi, Todd. Glad you could join me. Let me turn down the light just a little." With her comment the glow around Miss Penny reduced to a comfortable glow.

"Thank you. Uh. May I help you Miss Penny?" Todd thought the perfunctory politeness a little odd considering Miss Penny had broken into his apartment and was sitting in his bedroom. Still it seemed right, so he went with it.

Todd's senses began to adjust, and he began to really observe Miss Penny. She had always been more Mom than career woman. Her age, while not old was





decidedly a few decades older than his. Her face was soft. Her hair a brownish blond, more blond than brown. She had few wrinkles, but those she carried were caused by happiness and laughter. But try as he might he couldn't tell what color the eyes. They glowed or more correctly flashed.

"It's time to go, Todd. I have only an hour." Miss Penny picked up his discarded robe and glided over to the edge of the bed. She glided. She didn't walk. And it became more apparent that she was the source of the light. Her form faded in and out as she moved. She was less solid, more ghostly.

"Ah, Miss Penny. You aren't quite real, are you?" Todd had sat up in the bed and crowded close to the headboard as if that could give him any protection from an apparition.

"Well done, Todd. I am not. Now please put on the robe and stand up." Miss Penny held the robe out for Todd.

Todd hesitated, then got out of the bed and quickly put on the robe. Nothing was making any sense. He had to be dreaming. But he decided to persist in the fantasy and see where it went.

"Who are you? What are you, Miss Penny?"

"Ghost of Christmas Past, of course. Were you expecting another ghost?" Miss

Penny grinned as she headed for the only window in the room.

"Ghost of Christmas Past. Now I know this is a bitchin' dream." Todd got excited as he moved toward Miss Penny.

Miss Penny stopped suddenly in her movements and turned to face him. "Dream. You believe me a dream, Todd?"





Todd paused, then continued. “Well, yeah. What else could it be? I mean its not even Christmas Eve. You can’t be real. You’re nothing but...”

“A bit of undigested beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese. Maybe even a fragment of an underdone potato? Have you had any of that to eat tonight? No? Not that then. Really, Todd. Don’t you think I’ve heard all this before?” Miss Penny was on a rant and all Todd could do was watch.

“Dickens was a good man. Told a good tale about his own visitations. But the editing just ruined our regular visits. Hardly anyone believes the visitations at face value anymore. Think it is all some kind of fiction from reading his darn book.

Epecially if we visit on any night but Christmas.

Everybody thinks all these visits are nothing more than dreams or worse some ghost tale.” Miss Penny took a moment and then a large sigh. Then she continued.

“Todd, Christmas isn’t a tale that is told on one night of the year. It isn’t a feeling had only during the Christmas season. Christmas, the Christmas season is a feeling, a tale told and felt year ‘round. Haven’t you witnessed a giving hand when you needed it? A good deed at a bad time? All of those acts are acts of Christmas whether done in the heat of July or the cold depths of January. Christmas thrives all year Todd. You know that. Christmas and the Ghost of Christmas Past is there when you need it. And right now, Todd you need it. You are at your own crossroads and I am here to help. Here, give me your hand.” Miss Penny reached for Todd’s hand.

Todd extended his hand, but his mind was in a war of confusion. If this was a dream it was getting very real. If it wasn’t a dream. Then what? Why did he need help? And





Miss Penny, dream or not was a bit sassy. Not what one would expect in the ghost realm.

Miss Penny took Todd's hand and placed it against the window. It was cold. Very cold. The night outside was a winter's night and the temperatures had dropped. Todd pulled his hand back.

"Geez, that's cold!" Todd rubbed his hand with the other trying to warm it. The shock of the cold window had galvanized his attention. If he had been asleep he wasn't now. He looked up to find Miss Penny. She was smiling at him as she floated on the other side of the window! She reached back in the room took Todd's hand and pulled him to her. In a moment he found himself floating 3 stories above the street with nothing between him and the cold except a mid-calf robe and a pair of boxers. He might have not been totally convinced it wasn't a dream, but Todd was now open to the alternative.

"I guess this is where I ask you if where we are going is long past?" Todd tried to regain his senses as he floated.

"Not long past. Your past. And a short one it is. Short, but significant." Miss Penny flew along the city, past the river, mountains, farmland and valleys. Quickly, very quickly he found himself in a tiny suburb at a familiar one-story ranch house. Plastic Santa's and gaudy red, blue and green lights graced the yard glistening on the covering of snow.



"Suncrest. Really? Suncrest subdivision. I was ten when we lived here. Mom was. Mom was." Todd faded off.

"Alive. Yes, Todd. Your mother was alive. Making cookies and decorating the house." Miss Penny pulled him into the living room. There he saw himself wide-eyed, excited and anxious. It was days before Christmas, but his mom always made it so wonderful. She was wrapping another 'secret' gift box. It was so big and full of good things. It had candy, little meats, some canned goods, toys, and even a small dolly. Todd wondered who the





mysterious person was that was going to get such a great present.

“The secret gift. I had almost forgotten. She must have made 20 or thirty of those each Christmas. She bought the gifts, made the cookies, put in candy and even a ham or two. All the trimmings for a holiday meal. Then she would give them to friends, neighbors, people having a hard time. Didn’t care about race, creed or politics. Just need.” Todd remembered.

He remembered how he found out what she was doing. She took him with her on a visit. It was a house to a fellow classmate. Well, the guy was in the class behind him. He really only saw him on occasion. But he lived in their neighborhood. Their house was nice. But there wasn’t any lights or decorations that year. When he went inside to help their rooms were almost barren and very cold. He remembered the awkwardness and embarrassment



he felt for the family. His classmate’s mom started crying when she saw the large gift box. His mom put her arm around her and sat with her at the table for almost an hour as the woman cried. He took his classmate outside with the other kids while their moms talked.

He found out that his classmate’s dad had gotten really sick. They weren’t sure he was going to make it. His classmate’s mom had been using everything to keep the family together. But it didn’t look like Christmas was going to come this year. His classmate looked up at him and said thanks. Just thanks. It was enough. His mom came and got him then they jumped in the car to head back home.

“Your family must have been very rich to be able to give all that food and gifts away to strangers and friends.” Miss Penny was holding Todd’s hand as traveled to another part of his past.

“We weren’t rich. Mom worked. Dad held two jobs. They worked hard for what we got.” Todd was getting defensive.





“Still for all their work they seemed to find the time for family and others. The greed of their employers paled when it came time to help friends, old and new.” Miss Penny sped on.

Todd reflected on what she said. When was the last time he gave to another without expectation of reward? She was right about business as well. Seems all they cared about was money, wealth and profits. That was their measure. Not the welfare of their employees or the people they served. The character of the company had died in favor of profit. Now that he thought about it, companies these days were no better than those delivery drivers badgering for an extra dollar or keeping an errant package. Todd shuddered his disgust.



Miss Penny stopped in front of an old church. It was a monolithic structure in the heart of a big city. Granite façade with large wooden doors and tall steeples hard against the sidewalk.

“Old Saint Thomas’. I recognize this place anywhere.” Todd began to smile. Then his demeanor saddened. “It’s the Christmas after, isn’t it?”

Miss Penny nodded. “Yes, the Christmas after your mother died.”

“I don’t want to go in.” Todd resisted.

“But here we are.” Miss Penny and he were standing in the basement kitchen. The local poor were gathering for the evening meal. Todd looked over toward the soup line and saw his Dad. He was dishing out soup and bread for those that needed it. It was a memory seared into his mind.

“I hated him for being here, dishing out soup. Mom had just died a few days ago and here he was helping the poor. What about me? What about my sister? Why couldn’t he help us? We needed him at home, not here. We needed him!” Todd was crying now. Tears flowed freely down his face.





Todd watched as his father struggled to put some soup in a bowl. Then he broke down. Todd had never seen this before. He wasn't there when it happened. Todd had been home sulking, hating his father.

Todd saw his father struggling against his grief. Tears flowing. The church staff moved to help but were quietly moved aside by those that were being served. They kneeled next to him and held him in their embrace. They formed a circle of simple protection and love around his Dad until his Dad could cry no more. Then they took him to a table in a far corner and cared for him.

"It seems your mother's death was overwhelming for your Dad as well. Good to have friends to help you, isn't it?" Miss Penny stepped back as Todd looked closely at the scene before him.

"I was so angry with him that Christmas. It seemed he didn't care for us anymore. We had no tree, no presents, no big secret boxes. It was so dark. I never even considered he was hurting as much as he was. God I was such an ass." Todd face was a mask of tears.

"You were sixteen." Miss Penny smiled comfortingly and continued. "I understand you two overcame your grief and are closer than ever now."



"Yeah. Years later. It was after a pretty awful fight. My sister wouldn't have it anymore. She put her foot down and made us confront it. We yelled at each other. I was relentless, bent on scoring hurtful points. I wanted him to suffer as I did. After a few moments he just stood there and

let me scream. His face was ashen and hurt. But his eyes carried such love. I remember the eyes so much. When I couldn't yell anymore he came and hugged me. He wouldn't let go. Not until I knew he loved me. Then I cried so hard. I grabbed him and held on. We cried until we could cry no more. It got much better after that." Todd's emotions were raw as he watched his father sitting in that old church pantry.





“Sounds like a good sister.” Miss Penny took my hand.

“The best.” I wiped away a tear. I always had a great fondness for my little sister.

We alighted on the lawn of a University. Bells tolled the afternoon class change. Snow filled the main yard and students ran to and fro trying to get to class or at least out of the cold. I remained warm despite my lack of attire. But I recognized the place. My alma mater.

“You graduated six months early at the end of the Fall semester, right before Christmas didn’t you?” Miss Penny glided over the yard as we watched a younger me plod along a sidewalk dusted in snow. My footprints trailed behind me. An older man was beside me. We were deep in discussion.



“Mr. Gruffman!” I hadn’t thought of him for some time. He was a mentor to me while I was in college. He taught beginning economics. I had him my sophomore year. We were in decidedly different disciplines, but we connected.

“He was the one that taught you the value of financial management isn’t he?” Miss Penny’s comment was a statement devoid of sentiment.

“Yes. He was the first one that showed me a path to success. Maybe even wealth.” I felt a little colder. It didn’t seem as warm as before. Miss Penny’s light was beginning to fade.

“What did Mr. Gruffman think of your mom’s Christmas boxes?” Miss Penny was pressing now. It seemed important to her.

“He thought they were a waste. That the money my mom put into the boxes could have been better used to help us. Put some money in savings. Maybe helped us live a better life. He had a good argument.” It was definitely getting colder now.





“You believed him?” Miss Penny was curious now. She wanted to know the answer.

“Yes. If we had kept the money, moved ahead, sometime in the future we would have been able to help more people. As our fortune grew we could do greater good. It was logical.”

“But didn’t the people need the help now?” The question was soft, sincere.

“Yes, but in the future we would have a greater impact on more people.” I was sure of my position. Mr. Gruffman was educated, experienced. He had to know.

“So you stopped the Christmas boxes. You concentrated on your job. Paying your bills. Getting ahead? Forgot about those in need now? Turned your back on others and concentrated on you.”

“Yes. I am doing very well. My bills are paid. I have a good apartment. I am in poised for a permanent position.” I was rattling off my recent accomplishment with pride. Miss Penny’s eyes started to tear up.

“So the good health of your personal economy is the measure of success. Character, morals, ethics, compassion, empathy are secondary? Lack of those can be excused as long as you are successful? As long as the economy is good?” Miss Penny was fading. She was becoming more ghost than guide.

I hesitated with my answer.

“Is that what you were taught, Todd? Is that what you believe? That the character of the man need not be measured if his economy is strong?” Miss Penny was fading fast now. There was naught left but her blazing eyes and the echo of her words. Then she was gone, and I was alone. Adrift on a darkened path on a forgotten yard.

“Where are you going? You can’t leave me here! I’ll freeze.” I cried out as she faded away. I was getting worried. I was really beginning to hope this was all a dream. Some Dickens induced fog from a recent television show. But the wind started to howl. The snow swirled





faster. It was beginning to become a whiteout. I saw a park bench next to a solitary street light. I gathered my robe about me and curled up on the bench. My teeth began to chatter. I shivered. Then I heard the chime toll one.





Chapter 3

I looked up. I was in my bedroom curled on the plastic chair that Miss Penny had introduced herself. I was in my robe and boxer shorts. My mind whirled. I knew I was awake. I could feel the hard back of the plastic chair. The coolness of the room invaded my robe. But I began to worry. If Miss Penny was real. If she wasn't a dream, the Ghost of Christmas Present would soon visit.

I didn't know if I wanted confirmation of ghosts, let alone Christmas Ghosts. I wasn't religious on any level. But religion didn't seem to be a factor in the production of Christmas Ghosts. My welfare did though. Somehow, how I grew as a human was important. It mattered. It was an existential question I was beginning to contemplate when I smelled chili cooking in the next room. Chili. Why chili? I wondered if I left something warming on the stove? I

needed to check this out. Besides I was getting hungry.

I climbed off the chair, cinched up the robe and headed to the kitchen. When I opened the door I was immediately hit by a fully decorated room. A live Christmas tree sat in one

far corner, covered in blinking colored lights, gold, red and silver bulbs of all various shapes and sizes. In another corner sat an artificial tree spinning round and round with a steady blur of white lights. It was filled with the most stylish of decorations as if it was put together by a professional decorator. In one another corner sat an aluminum tree, spinning with a spot light pouring





different shades of color over its brilliance. On tables, chairs, and stands sat garland in colors of green, silver and even red. Included in the decorations were tiny villages, houses, and scenes of various Christmases through the ages.

Christmas noise permeated the room as each tree, scene, and trinket played some sort or variation of Christmas songs. The large screen television was blaring, oddly enough, the 1954 version of *"The Christmas Carol"*. In the center of it all was a table overflowing with taco's, pizza's, turkey, ham, mashed potatoes, greens, chicken, and chili. I was sure if I looked hard enough I would find a hamburger and fries on the table. My eyes moved from the decorations, to the table, to the television to the man sitting in the largest reclining lounge I had ever seen. He was laughing a loud and deep laugh like a man that was thoroughly amused down to his soul. It was Nicolas from the mall. Of course it was.



"Ghost of Christmas Present I assume." I laughed in spite of myself and headed to the table. I grabbed a chocolate chip cookie. As I said I was a bit hungry.

"Well of course I am. Ready?" Nicholas stood up with a loud, large laugh.

Nicholas had a large bowl of chili crocked under one arm and a large spoon for eating it waving in his other. With a wave of the large spoon we left the room. Without preamble or lecture we were off. Nicholas never spilt a drop of chili from the large bowl or dropped a spit of sauce from the spoon.

I found myself at the counter of the diner I usually ate breakfast. Miss Penny was no where to be seen. Jenny, one of the regulars, was sitting at the counter. Like before we could observe without being seen. I watches as she smiled a weak smile and stared in the distance. She





had her simple cup of coffee and two pieces of toast in front of her. We had never exchanged much information. I knew she worked as an assistant in one of the office towers close by.

“Doesn’t seem enough breakfast for a hard-working woman.” Nicholas interrupted my musings.

“Always eats like that. I don’t interfere. Figure she can eat what she wants.” I was suddenly stunned that I had never really paid any attention to her before and defended my actions.

“True. We shouldn’t interfere. It could be embarrassing for her, or you. But it does seem quite a little bit of sustenance. Let’s look a little further.” With a wave of his ever-present soup spoon we soon found ourselves in an outer office of an indiscriminate office building.

It resembled every other office building I had ever seen. Gray or brown tones, metal desk, two wooden chairs with little padding sat on each side of a simple end table. A computer screen set at an angle on a basic desk with a keyboard at the ready. A telephone perched on the opposite side ready for use. Jenny was sitting at the desk typing furiously away as she sported an ear bud in one ear. A picture frame showing three little urchins was set just to the right of the computer screen. Jenny occasionally stopped her typing, took a look at the picture, sighed and began the typing all over again.



As they watched, the door to the inner office opened up. An older man stepped out and threw a couple of file folders on her desk. He looked down at her with a suspect smile as she looked up. Seemed he couldn’t help making a comment.

“You know Jenny, you should smile more. You look so much prettier when you smile.” He turned to walk back into his office. Then he turned to address her once more.





“It wouldn’t hurt if you wore a skirt now and then you know?” He went back into his office and closed the door.

Jenny stared in disgust at the office door. Todd stood in disbelief.

“What the....” He couldn’t believe what he had heard. He turned to Nicholas “Who the hell does he think he is? Why doesn’t she turn him in. HR would have something to say about that.”

“What? And risk her job? Who would they believe? Him or her? And if she was fired where would she go?” Nicholas asked as they watched a co-worker enter the room. Nicholas waved his soup spoon in the air as he entered. The waft of good chili fell over the room. A warmth and happiness that was heretofore lacking in this sterile room.

“Here Jenny. I saved some donuts from the morning meeting. Take one and eat it. Ol’ Fussbudget can wait a few more minutes for the report.” Jenny smiled and took the offered donut.

“God that tastes good. Thanks.” Jenny leaned back and savored the food.

“Yeah. It probably does. Now I expect you to finish that up. No more saving them all for your kids. You have to eat. I got some more in the bag for them.”

The co-worker handed a bag over and Jenny stuffed it into her overlarge purse.

“You’re a blessing you know.” Jenny paused between bites and smiled. The room grew warmer for the want of it. “You know I suddenly have a hankering for chili. Maybe a big bowl for me and the kids. You’re invited of course.”

Todd turned to Nicholas smiling. “The spirit of the season in a chili bowl?”

Nicholas shrugged and let out a large laugh. “Well, the traditional Christmas meal has changed over the years. Late night present wrapping, last minute visits,





hurried present shopping, and cold nights have created new shared memories over non-traditional foods. These new foods have become the tradition. Of course we still have the turkey, ham and dressings, thank goodness.



Always liked a good turkey. But there are plenty of other variations now. Especially pizza. Lots of pizza.”

“Nice. But why doesn’t Jenny leave. There’s plenty of jobs these days. The economy is buzzing.” Todd was incensed how Jenny was treated.

“You mean like you? How many jobs do you have now? Three? Four?” Nicholas’ comment hit home. Jobs may be plentiful, but it doesn’t mean they pay enough.

“Yeah. I know what you mean.” Todd looked softly at Jenny. “It takes a lot to make a living these days. Seems all you are doing is making some other guy richer or some company bigger. Doesn’t seem anyone cares about those that do the work. Hard as heck to find a decent paying job. For an economy that is booming it doesn’t seem to be helping everyone. Even those that work hard. And try to find a job in your area of expertise. You know it doesn’t seem success falls equally on everyone.”

Nicholas smiled, raised his bowl of chili and whisked them off to a small apartment in an almost decent part of town. The apartment had a small front room that blended into a smaller kitchen. A counter divided the two sections. A small TV was plastered against one wall in the front room. In front of it sat a battered couch. Sitting on the couch were three kids, the oldest no more than nine. Toys were splayed all over the room. A single rocker with an older woman rocking quietly sat between the couch and the kitchen. A gatekeeper keeping the kids from what few goodies the bare cupboards would bear.

Off to the left as you entered was a hallway. Todd assumed it led to bedrooms and a bath. On the right behind the couch was a half desk cluttered with papers.





Above the desk hung two diplomas. Todd looked at the kids. They were laughing at some cartoon on the TV. The old woman was half asleep, more snoring than alert. Todd's attention was drawn to the diplomas. Once was a Master's Degree in Business. It was Jenny's. Todd was stunned.

"A master's degree and she's working as an assistant. Hell, she ought to be that bastard's boss. Not taking his crap." As Todd turned in frustration towards Nicholas the door opened, and Jenny walked in.

The kids erupted in glee. They ran to their mom while the old woman roused herself from her nap. Jenny gave each a hug and a kiss and passed out the stale donuts to each one. "How were they momma?"

"Good as gold, as always." Jenny's mom gave her a hug and smile. "The little one's still got that runny nose. I worry. We need to get him to the doctor."

"I know mom. We'll try to get to the free clinic this week. Can't afford the deductible at the HMO from the company, especially this time of year." Jenny glanced at the sparse Christmas decorations covering the walls. Her momma nodded in understanding.



"Well chili is on the stove. I gotta go. Bingo is waiting." Momma started putting on her coat.

"Chili! Oh, mom. How did you know? Thank you." Jenny grabbed her mom and gave her a hug.

Todd turned to Nicholas. He just shrugged, laughed and waved the spoon over his head.

"Why is she alone? Where is her husband?" Todd was invested in Jenny's story and wanted to know more.

"He got sick just as she finished her degree. They were a great couple. She helped him get his degree and then he helped her. Kept his promise. Took care of the kids. Held a job. He was so proud when she graduated. They worked hard. Paid their bills. But didn't matter. High





yearly deductions, co-pays, and specialist bills added up. Savings went early. So did the house. She barely had funds for the funeral.

Took what she had left and moved in here with her mother. Three kids and two women in a two-bedroom apartment. But you know. If we take care of ourselves first we can take care of more people in need later.” Nicholas threw Todd’s words back at him. Todd lowered his head in shame.

Nicholas continued. “Doesn’t seem to me that the measure of the success of their economy mattered to them in the end. The economy was an uncaring material thing that came and went on the whims of chance. It owes its allegiance to no one. But the character, compassion, and honesty of someone endures. It ensures there will be help when needed. Character can rebuild an economy. Lack of character runs and leaves others to fend for themselves.

The nurse that held Jenny’s hand when her husband died. The doctor that made sure he had that last chance. The mother that opened her home. Their character, the character that provided compassion, hope, and honesty mattered more than any transient wealth, at least to them. It was there when it was needed. Not in a promise of some future benefit.”



“My mom said the same thing. Well in a way. She told me not to worry about what I didn’t have. But make sure I was the friend I wished I had.” Todd reflected on a quiet talk with his mom before she died. It was a private moment only they shared in the confines of an antiseptic hospital room.

“Character mattered.” Nicholas nodded his chili bowl was getting cold. Todd could feel it.

“You were there?” Todd was stunned that Nicholas knew her last words to him.





“She always kept us in her heart. Where else would we be. She was a wonderful woman.” Nicholas waved his spoon one more time.

They were in the mall. The Santa throne was empty. People were walking all around but Todd’s attention was drawn to a small woman with a very tiny child sitting and waiting. They were the first in line to visit Santa that day.

“You ever wonder why you have your Santa job, Todd?” Nicholas walked over to the small child and waved his spoon. The smell was waning and could only be felt in the smallest of spaces. The child and mother smiled. Christmas spirit was powerful even in small batches.

“My agency sent me. I was available.” Todd looked confused. “Why was there more?”

“A man made a promise. He said he would show. Then on the day he was needed he went to another job. Minutes before he was to give joy to many, he broke a promise. It wasn’t a big promise. The job was a much better job. Paid more. Permanent.

But instead of finding someone to cover. Instead of giving notice. He just didn’t show. He had no character. No compassion. It shouldn’t matter. It was just another acting job. But to this child, this mother. It was Santa. It was a moment of Christmas they would be able to share before her daughter went into the hospital. Maybe the only Christmas they would share.” Nicholas’ hand brushed the head of the small child.

“What happened. Did they see Santa?” Suddenly it seemed really important. The child had to see Santa.

Nicholas turned to look at the empty Santa throne. Two very familiar creatures were crawling over the throne. Their eyes were red. They were dressed in rags. Their faces were drawn. They





carried a fetid odor with them. Todd could barely look at them.

“Want and Ignorance.” Todd looked to Nicholas for confirmation. He nodded.

“The downfall of man and woman. Want and Ignorance. They’re never too far away. My burden to carry.” Nicholas stood between Todd and the diseased pair. “Not too close, Todd. They are as infectious as they were when Dickens met them. Even more so now.”

Todd looked at them clinging to the throne, begging him to come forth. “The little girl and mother. Did they see Santa?”

“Did they, Todd?” Nicholas was fading.

Todd began to shudder. The Ghost of Future Yet to Come should be next. He went to sit on the side of Santa’s stage. He looked back for Nicholas. But the throne was gone. So was the mall and the little girl.





Chapter 4

The bell chimed one. He was sitting on the side of his bed in his own apartment, a black wispy dark cloud hovered just in front of his face. It carried the weight of dread. A fingerlike wisp snaked out from the cloud and pointed to his front room. Todd rose and followed the dark cloud to the next room.

It was Christmas morning. Todd saw himself sitting in his pajamas flipping through television channels. His only reference to the day was the clock on the wall and

the well wishes on the television from disinterested hosts. There were no presents, no tree, no decorations. He was alone drinking a cold beer in his pajamas on Christmas morning. On the coffee table before him was a notice from



the delivery service. He was being laid off.

His Santa hat was thrown on the floor next to his Santa coat. A sad reminder that his job at the Mall was done as well. Todd could tell he was not in a good place. He had lost two jobs in the same day. Todd looked at himself and wondered how his graphics design job was doing. The wisp of a finger pointed to another letter on the table. It was a performance review letter from the graphics design company for December 28th. It dawned on Todd he could lose all three jobs in a week.

Todd was devastated. He wanted to grab a beer and join himself. He had no support, no help. Even his sister and dad were hundreds of miles away in another city. Christmas was beginning to suck. No income, hefty



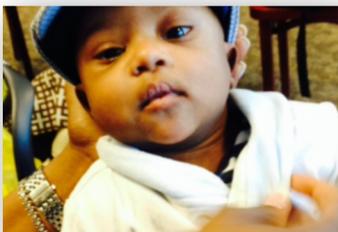


student loans due, along with rent and utilities. He had been saving, but you couldn't save much on basic incomes. Didn't look good for the New Year. Not many people looking to hire after the Christmas season.

Todd, the one watching TV, paused his channel surfing on an old "*Christmas Carol*" movie and put the remote down. He grabbed a beer and an old piece of pizza. He settled in for a pity party scheduled to last all Christmas day.

The black cloud swirled around Todd. He found himself in Jenny's apartment. She was holding on to her momma as she cried softly. Her momma held her in her arms and cried softly as well.

"I can't do it again, momma. I can't go through those hospitals and doctors again. I have no money. I couldn't even afford Christmas dinner or presents for the kids. How can I help him?" Jenny was crying so hard it hurt Todd's heart.



Her momma sat her up to look in her eyes. "Look Jenny we will do as we have to. That boy's sick. You heard the doctor. He needs to see a specialist. Whatever it takes we're gonna do. Now wipe your tears and go out and be with your kids. I'll put together a pie for

Christmas. Then we'll have some soup and whatever's in the fridge. Won't be the best Christmas we've ever seen, but we'll have Christmas.

Todd was stunned. The baby had to see a specialist? Good God this was just like Tiny Tim in "*The Christmas Carol*". But it was real. Or maybe Dickens hadn't been telling a fable? Todd turned to the cloud.

"Is the baby gonna get real sick? Is he gonna die?" Todd couldn't handle it. This wasn't some fictional character in a story or on television. It was a small child. A baby that he knew. Art shouldn't imitate life so closely.

The black cloud covered Todd and took him to a hospital room. The baby was hooked up to monitors and





intravenous tubes. His grandmother was crying. His mother was in discussion with a doctor.

“We can’t make a determination without the test. We have to do the test and soon. If it is what we suspect, he’ll need surgery.” The doctor was handing Jenny a paper with the costs for the tests and surgery.

“I can’t afford this. Doesn’t my insurance cover all of this?” Jenny was frantic.

Most of it, but you do have a high deductible. It has to be paid first. I’m sorry.” The doctor turned and left the room. Jenny went to the nearest chair and fell into it. She was lost. Todd was beside himself watching. He turned to the black cloud hovering beside him.

“I know this part. I remember. These are shadows of what may be. They aren’t what will be. If I change, they can change. Right? Right?” Todd was screaming now. Geezus he needed an answer. But the black cloud just swirled around him. He was back at the mall.

The little woman was sitting on the bench. She was crying. She was alone. Oh hell, she was alone. Where was the little girl? Where was Santa? Where was Nicholas? He had to find Nicholas. He’d go to the locker room.



Nicholas would be there. Or he could get his Santa suit. Then he get the woman. They’d find the child. Santa would be there for Christmas. Then he would find Jenny. They would fix this. They could fix this.

Todd ran to the employee locker room. He burst through the door. The swirling black cloud was bigger, angrier. Todd thought he could see small sparks of lightning burst inside the cloud. A thin black finger poked out from the cloud and pointed at Todd’s locker. Todd jostled the lock open and flung open the door.

He fell inside. Blackness surrounded him. He felt himself falling. He hadn’t finished. Jenny’s baby needed to be helped. He had to get his Santa suit. The mother and daughter had to have Christmas. He needed to call his





sister and father. He had. Oh God he had to do something, anything. He had to do it now, when it was needed. Not in the future. People couldn't wait. The baby couldn't wait. The mother and little girl couldn't wait.

It didn't matter if he had money. If his economy was OK. It was what he did now that was important. Character mattered. It mattered more than money, position, or power. How he responded to a crisis, mattered. His compassion for others, mattered. People, mattered. Who they were, how they treated others, mattered. You had to be able to trust people. They had to have character, morals, ethics and compassion first.

All other measures of success faded without those. If you didn't have these values you lacked the capacity to care, to help, to lead. Greed and corruption would be your constant companion. Destruction would be your handmaiden. Devastation and ruin would follow in your wake. You, no matter your wealth, would be deemed a failure. A hated figure doomed to be forgotten or worse, remembered as a disease upon humanity. The truths Dickens wrote about long ago still held true today.

Todd screamed to escape the blackness. He thrashed and kicked. Suddenly, the blackness disappeared. He sat up. He was in his bed. His blankets were now spread across the floor.

Todd's heart was beating hard. It could have been a dream. But he knew it wasn't. It was real. He knew without looking he still had days before Christmas. But Todd knew what he had to do. He smiled. Purpose filled his heart. He was going to be the friend he always wanted.

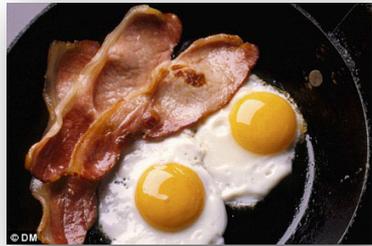




Chapter 5

That morning Todd walked to the diner. Miss Penny was serving, same as always. Todd looked hard at her, but no recognition of last night's events crossed her face. Todd noticed Jenny was coming in for her coffee and toast. He leaned over and ordered a couple of eggs and bacon to go along with her toast and coffee. He paid for the breakfast with a nod to Miss Penny.

Miss Penny placed the full breakfast before Jenny and smiled. Jenny protested. But Miss Penny true to form didn't blink. She insisted it was already paid so Jenny might as well eat up. Jenny asked who paid, but Miss Penny was mum on the subject. Jenny smiled while she savored every bite.



Todd walked to his graphic design job with a warm feeling. He was thinking about having chili for lunch. It had become one of his favorite holiday dishes. He sat down at his desk and pushed aside the tasks of the day. He knew it wouldn't take long to design his new personal project. Then he could get to work.

Todd was halfway through his design when the owner walked by. He stopped and looked at the display on Todd's screen. It was decidedly Christmas and not any way related to summer. But it was what was being designed that got his attention. He tapped Todd on the shoulder to ask what he was doing.

Todd related the story of his mother's Christmas boxes. He told him of the looks on the faces of the kids without a Christmas hope getting a box of goodies. The





single moms and dads, the families on hard times that got, for a moment, a connection with everyone. A helping hand, some dignity, a Christmas to share with their family.

The owner wanted to help. He asked what Todd needed. How could they fill the boxes? How many boxes he wanted? He called his wife and told her the story. She wanted to help and added a few more families to the list. In an hour Todd had names and addresses of more than twenty people. He was given a budget and support. His design was going to adorn all the Christmas boxes. But they needed a truck to deliver the boxes. Todd had an idea.

Todd walked into the office of his delivery company and got the attention of his supervisor. He told him about the Christmas boxes and their need for a truck. The supervisor smiled. He asked if they could add a few more names. Todd smiled. A bargain was made and delivery's assured.



Todd got home late that night but couldn't sleep. He could hardly wait for morning. The next day Jenny's breakfast was waiting courtesy of Miss Penny. He paid the bill and walked away without a care. Jenny dove in with relish, never knowing her benefactor.

Todd arrived at the graphic design company with the owner, his wife and a couple of coworkers waiting. He let them know about the truck and the few more in need. Excitement grew. His design for the boxes was sent to production. The boxes would be ready four days before Christmas. The whole company was stoked about the plan. The people at Todd's delivery service were just as excited as he was. Neither company could hardly wait for delivery day.

Todd still had his duties at the mall. He arrived early on the weekends and looked for the small woman and little girl. But he never saw them. He worried. But he had too many children excited to see him. Worry would





have to wait. Nicholas showed up in a great jovial mood as always. But like Miss Penny, not a mention of the visitation.

Delivery day came. Todd marveled at the collection of boxes. Each was bright, cheery, and quite Christmassy. Each came with a large bow and ribbon attached. Everyone in both companies were besides themselves with anticipation and good cheer. They were sending help to friends, strangers, and people on the edges that could not or would not ask for help. Each had been there or were one paycheck from being there themselves. They were giving with their heart.



Early on they thought they might take videos for posterity. But the first boxes delivered created such personal emotional reactions the idea was quickly abandoned.

Phones were put away. Helping hands were offered instead.

More than one of the delivery crew offered a shoulder to cry upon. What was expected to take a few minutes at each location, turned into more, much more. In order to get to all the recipients many company employees from the delivery and graphic design companies started meeting the truck at each delivery. They made sure someone could take the time to lend a care or an ear. Eager cheer turned into warm emotion. Someone said it smelled a lot like warm chili.

Todd personally delivered his box to Jenny, her mom, and her kids. It took her by surprise. But it only took one extra look for Jenny to recognize Todd from the diner. Jenny's eyes teared up and didn't stop leaking. Todd placed the big box in the center of the room. The youngest one's eyes were as big as saucers. Her mom offered prayers and thanks. Todd took Jenny aside and asked how the little one was doing. The question started a waterfall. Todd just stood and held her while she released all her sorrow.





When she had recovered Todd passed a card with his name and phone number. He told her to call when she took the little one to the doctor. He didn't know what he could do. But he would be there. It seemed to help. Jenny squeezed his hand hard as he left the apartment. He could hear children laughing as he walked away.

It was Christmas Eve and Nicholas needed to take the day off. So Todd offered to fill in the last shift. The season had been good to him. He had gotten a bonus at both places of work. Even got a few handshakes from his fellow employees and the boss. He was in quite the cheery mood. Just perfect for a Santa taking last minute gift requests from worried children and their parents. As his time as Santa dwindled. He watched as the mall cleared. One or two last minute children sat on his lap while their parents smiled in wonder. It was close to quitting time. Many of the stores had already closed. More than a few stragglers were headed to the car.

As the lights dimmed Todd saw her. She was hurrying as best she could to see Santa. Her little girl in tow. A knitted cap covered her blonde curls. Red eye sockets circled her deep blue eyes. She was pale and weak. Her mother was crying. But they were coming to see Santa.

Todd would wait. The elves shifted in their shoes trying to get him to close and avoid the last-minute delay. But Todd waited. It was as if he had been waiting for her all his life. The small mother was winded from the long trip in the mall to see Santa. But she saw him. She took a moment to catch her breath. Santa would wait. She knew he would.



The mother took her daughters hand and walked up the ramp to see the Jolly Old Elf. As she arrived with her child Santa looked down and pulled the little wisp of a girl on his lap. The little girl held her breath and looked with wonder at the large man in the red cap. The mother





reached for her cell phone to take a picture. One of the elves walked up quietly, put a hand on her shoulder, and asked her to stand next to Santa. She was a bit flustered, but assured it was alright. She went and stood next to Santa and her darling while a picture was taken with the mall camera. Then another flash was taken with her own phone.

The elves, Santa and even the mall janitor's teared up. Santa leaned in and for a few moments the little girl spoke about Christmas. She was, for at time, a little girl with a few wishes. She was normal. When she was done she reached for her mother. Her mother took her from Santa's lap and headed to the exit ramp. At the end of the exit stood three elves with a large picture of the mother, her daughter and Santa.

The mother turned, smiled a Christmas smile, and headed to the doors. The Christmas music ended. The Santa throne lights were turned off. Santa and his elves headed to the exits. Tomorrow was Christmas.



Todd woke up to the chime of a bell. He looked around in concern until he realized it could be the church bell four blocks over. He had never heard it before, but somehow he could hear it plainly now. Todd had put a slow cooker on before he went to bed and he could smell the wonderful smell of homemade chili. He knew he had a few beers in the fridge and some warm socks to wear as he watched some Christmas specials and a football game. He had even bought himself a new video game that should wear some time out of the day.

Todd tied the robe around his boxers and headed to the front room. He smiled at the small tree he placed on the table as he switched on the tube. "A Christmas Carol" was playing. Fittingly he left it on while he grabbed some breakfast and settled in on the couch. Unexpectedly the doorbell rang. Todd was startled but moved off the couch





to see who it was. Todd opened the door to Jenny and her brood of kids.

“Miss Penny said you were eating at home today all alone. Not having you alone on Christmas. Not gonna let that happen.” Jenny moved into his apartment and took over. Apparently Miss Penny wasn’t having it either as she had sent Jenny with a full Christmas meal replete with pumpkin pie and whipped cream. In short order the kids had the video games out. Jenny had the plates on the table and serving dishes set. Chaos was reigning. It was perfect.

Well almost. His phone rang and Todd answered. His sister was on the line. She was with his Dad and they wanted to wish him Merry Christmas. His sister said she saw a video of him online. It was an interview about his delivering Christmas boxes.



“Mom is so proud of you, Todd. So am I.” Todd’s sister gushed. They finished talking just as the meal was ready. Jenny asked who it was.

“My sister. She called to wish me Merry Christmas.” Todd beamed. As

Todd went to take his seat he looked around at the smiling kids and Jenny. He remembered the visit from the Ghost of Christmas Future. His little apartment was testament to how things could change. Todd realized he never did get those letters from the delivery company or the graphic design company. His sister and father called. He was happy. He wasn’t alone.

Todd knew his personal economy wasn’t as successful as it could have been. But he was rich in so much more. Character, compassion, ethics and morals did matter more than a good economy. They were what was real. They were how you measured the worth of an individual or a country.





Todd tucked in for the Christmas dinner. Jenny sat down next to him and her kids gathered around. Jenny sniffed the air just a bit.

“Are you cooking chili?” Jenny looked toward the slow cooker.

“Yeah. It just seemed to be the thing to eat at Christmas.” Todd grinned in a bit of embarrassment.

“I think you may be right.” Jenny got a bowl for her and Todd. As they ate the chili it filled their hearts and warmed the room. The Christmas spirit was in the house. Nicholas would be proud.





Merry Christmas

And

Happy New Year

2020

May the Blessings of
Christmas be with
you all year





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