

The Christmas Text

Newspapers tumble along as people pass by bent and leaning into the wind clenching their winter coats tightly. The thought of another harsh cold night spent alone in grimy alley or under the overhang of a commuter rail had Ian depressed.

"How did I think this would be better," Ian thought to himself, his thin cotton hoody little protection from December's unforgiveness. He had a few dollars in his tennis shoe and some change remaining in his worn jeans pocket, but his pride would not take him home.

As the sun descended with the temperature, Ian found the corner behind an abandoned tenement building he had used before. With some oil-stained cardboard from a nearby Dempsey Dumpster, he constructed a wind break to push the cold away and huddled to sleep, newspaper crumpled and placed between his shirt and jacket for insulation. He saw that in a movie once. Ian's dreams that night were of a fireplace and Christmas-lit warmth.

An uncontrollable tremble from the bitter-biting cold fingered through his body and woke Ian. It was still dark, but nearly dawn—that time when the light appears to veil reality with illusions and he had to shake off the image of a cell phone laying at his feet.

"I could really use someone to talk to," he said aloud, though there was no one to hear him. Just about anything to say to anyone would be nice. He felt so isolated, and he was achingly hungry. It seemed like forever since Ian had eaten a home-cooked meal.

The fragrant drift of a nearby bakery didn't help matters either. So Ian reached into his pocket and counted out ten dimes and a quarter. "That'll buy a roll and some free butter."

As he pushed his body up to stand, Ian realized his hand was on an object. It vibrated...the familiar announcement that a text message arrived. Startled, realizing he hadn't imagined the phone, Ian sat back down. He leaned against the brick wall and studied his find.

Looking into the contacts folder, Ian thought he could return the phone to its owner and maybe get a small reward. He had a phone just like that only a year ago, before everything changed. Before anger overcame him and he slammed the door on the warmth of home.

There were no contacts in the phone's data base and it was fully charged. That seemed odd. Even stranger was the text message that popped up.

"Merry Christmas."

Ian's stomach's growl reminded him that he needed that roll. So he stuck the phone in a pocket and made his way toward the bakery.

Ian had an awful appearance—cloths wrinkled and dirty. He knew he smelled badly, too.

An old-ish man with a beard, wearing a bakers cap was standing behind the counter pricing a gingerbread house he just finished making. The man studied Ian as he approached. Ian was

a bit concerned about that rolling pin in the baker's hand, he knew violence could happen at any time to someone on the street, but his hunger pushed through.

"How much for a roll, sir?" Ian asked.

The man paused, stroked his beard deliberately, looking Ian up and down—producing an awkward silence, and Ian thought to himself, "He's going to make me leave." But the baker didn't. Instead, he turned around and selected a cinnamon roll clearly marked \$3.50 and wrapped it in white waxy paper. Then, smiling, he handed it to Ian saying "Merry Christmas young man" — following that with a quick nod and a wink.

Unsure how to respond, Ian nervously dug into his pocket, but the man quickly pushed his hand out indicating for Ian to stop. "Merry Christmas," the baker insisted.

Ian didn't know what came over him. He just broke down and wept. The roundish flour-dusted man, who looked like he ate what he baked, came around to Ian's side of the counter and put his hand on Ian's shoulder asking, "Don't you have somewhere to be?"

"No," pausing, and then correcting himself. "I mean, no sir," Ian replied timidly, "I'm here in the city...alone," tears collecting the dirt on his face as they streamed downward.

The old man looked squarely into the teenager's eyes and said, "you are never alone, son." Then, he walked Ian to the door and Ian turned to go on his way with the pastry in hand, but as to where he would go he didn't know.

As Ian was leaving the man said, "Make that call home Ian. It's time." Ian turned to look back thinking to say thank you, but the man was gone. Ian felt the phone in his pocket and knew the number to call. Before he could even speak he heard, "Come home son. Please come home."

Later, after a long talk with his father and mother and travel arrangements were made, Ian reached for the phone in his hoody's pocket to try and return it to its owner, but it wasn't there. Suddenly, it occurred to Ian, "how did that old man know my name?"

~ The End ~