

Old Man's Winter

by Anthony M. Powers

The old man's face is worn and tired, his nose and cheeks tinted red over his pale black skin from the frosty January winds blustering through town. He looks more than half frozen, which I don't find surprising. With the past week being in the negatives during the day, I can't imagine how cold it must be to sleep on the streets at night. He wipes a line of snot across the arm of his tattered jacket and it freezes almost instantly. He looks me in the eyes again.

"I didn't do nothing..." he mutters through chattering teeth. It's almost all he's said since I arrived at the scene. Thirty minutes ago, I was drinking my coffee in my nice warm cruiser, staring at my cell phone like I always do and wondering if Cheryl had changed her cell number again. And if she hadn't, if I called, would she let me talk to Gracie. I was parked about ten minutes away, next to this little park I used to take her to on my days off in the summer. I used to love to hear her laugh as I pushed her on the swings, the sun shining down on us, making her strawberry blonde hair seem even brighter. Then she'd hold my hand as we walked down to the Dairy Queen on the corner for ice cream, and she'd smile up at me the way a little girl smiles that makes you know she loves you.

But that was before the divorce. That was before her bitch of a mother left for California with her sugar-daddy doctor of a husband and took her away from me... Now they're a happy little family out on the coast while I'm still here in small town, Ohio, freezing my ass off outside of a mini mart with Old Man Winter to keep me company. Just me, him, and this little punk who still won't shut the hell up.

"That's a load of bullshit, man!" he yells at the both of us. "It's like I told you, he came up behind me as I was getting in my car and, like, threatened me and shit. He was all like 'give me your money and no one gets hurt.' He's a fucking liar, man!"

"I understand, son," I say, "I understood the first five times you told me." The kid's obviously a college student, as we're standing in a vacant convenient store parking lot less than half a mile away from

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the local university. Plus he's wearing a letterman's jacket from the school. Probably one of them "trust fund" kids, most likely from out of town. I can tell because of how he talks to me. Plus, the little fucker's tan.

"Listen, officer," he barks at me, "either do your fucking job and arrest this son of a bitch, or I'll make sure that you're filing urine samples 'til you retire." Funny-- I half expect him to ask me if I know who his father is.

The kid and I make eye contact and it turns into a staring contest. He looks like he wants to take my head off. Probably could if I was about ten years older, but, things being as they are, even without the badge I don't think he would have a chance. After a few more seconds, he breaks off his gaze to look at his watch. A fucking Rolex, no less. I knew because I'd seen the same watch around that prick Darrin's wrist the first time I met him. I remember because it was the only thing he or my Cheryl had on when I walked into our bedroom. The image pops into my head. Like it always does. Now I'm not sure if I'm shaking from the cold or from anger. Rich, little bastard. Stay calm, stay calm, stay ca—

"Goddammit, it's already past 11:00. I'm so fucking late. Could we hurry this up here?" he barks.

"What's the rush, son?" I ask, "Got yourself a hot date?" It cools me down a bit to know that this is not where he wants to be either. Because God knows I don't want to be out here in the cold all night with these two arguing back and forth all night. Although to be fair, there really wasn't much arguing going on. It's like if a man were trying to argue with a parrot who could only say "Polly want a cracker." He's not gonna get too far.

"None of your fucking business, pig," he says. I'm getting real fucking tired of this kid. If I'm not careful I know that I can get myself in a heap of trouble. So I turn back to Old Man Winter, and slowly try to get his side of the story again.

"Alright now, sir," I say, "I need you to tell me exactly what happened here tonight, okay? If you don't give me your side of the story, I'm going to have no choice but to take you in." The old man

looks up at me with just his eyes, his head hanging in front of him like there was a fifty pound weight around his neck. His dark brown eyes look black in the dull yellow glow of the streetlights.

"I didn't do nothing," he says to me with conviction. I sigh out a deep, cold breath and rub my temple with one of my gloved hands to show the man that he's giving me a headache. I glance up as his tired eyes move back toward the same spot of pavement he's been staring at for the last quarter of an hour and he stays quiet once more. The same can't be said for the kid.

"He fucking knows he's guilty, so just arrest him and get my money back so I can get the fuck out of here," he says. I try to ignore him, but this time he decides to get in my face. His nose is about an inch away from my face and I think he's standing on his toes to make himself even taller than he already is.

"I swear, I will have your badge," he whispers through gritted teeth, almost spitting every syllable in my eyes. His breath assaults my nostrils and on instinct my hand goes for my cuffs. But before I get them off my belt, the old man takes a step towards us, causing the kid to take three steps back and me to freeze. He slowly raises his hand towards me, clenching something in his fist. I stick out my hand palm up and he places into it a single crumpled piece of green paper. It's a soggy ten dollar bill that looks like it's on the verge of falling apart. I look up at the old man who's still staring at the ground, and then I look back over at the kid who sticks a piece of chewing gum into his mouth. His hands are shaking and I know it's not from the cold.

"See? I fucking told you, man," he says with a false hint of confidence in his voice as he goes to snatch the bill from my hand. I close it into a fist and turn towards the kid who takes another step back. This kid has been pushing me all night and it's time for a little pushing back. With my closed fist I shove him into the passenger door of his car and now I get in his face. His eyes get wide and he starts chewing furiously.

"Kid," I say, "I suggest you calm down and keep your fucking mouth shut before I take you down to the station for the night and

someone shuts it for you." I glance in his back seat where my suspicions are confirmed by a half empty glass bottle of what looks like cheap whiskey but is probably expensive rum. I look back at him, and now his complexion is almost as white as the snow and I can almost hear his heart beating. I turn back around and almost jump as the old man is standing about a foot in front of me, holding his hands out limply, still staring at the ground. He shivers as another gust of wind sweeps across the parking lot, blowing loose snowflakes all around us.

My eyes go down to my tightened fist, and then back up to meet Old Man Winters'.

"Who does this really belong to, sir?" I ask.

"To him who all things belong, officer," he says in almost a whisper as he looks upward. The kid scoffs under his breath and for the first time, I actually agree with him. Then my mind goes to the little golden crucifix necklace I bought Gracie for her First Communion last year. I hadn't been to church since, and it'll probably be the last time I'd ever see Cheryl or that asshole husband of hers. Fucking Darrin with his fucking Rolex and his fucking six-figure job on the other side of the fucking country. I just hope Gracie's happy. I hope she goes to a nice little school with nice little children from nice little families. I hope she doesn't forget that her poor, dead-beat cop Dad still loves her.

The sound of a car door opening brings me back to reality. The kid sits down in his drivers' seat and closes the door, but before he can get the keys in the ignition I'm already knocking on his window. He starts the car and rolls down his window, but before he can say a word, I reach in, turn it off again, and take the keys.

"Consider this a warning," I say. I throw the keys as hard as I can across the parking lot and into a small snow covered clearing on the other side. I know it makes it past the pavement because I don't hear them hit the ground. Without a word, I walk back to where Old Man Winter is standing next to my cruiser and open the back door. He silently sits down inside and I close the door. Before I get in the driver's seat, I drop the ten dollar bill that was still crumpled in my

fist onto the ground. As we pull out of the parking lot, I look in my rearview mirror to see the kid standing outside his car, screaming something at me and flicking me off. I can't help but crack a smile, and, to my surprise, I can see the old man can't help it either.

We stop at a red light and I pull my pack of Marlboros out of my left jacket pocket and my lighter from my right.

"Do you mind, sir?" I ask with a cigarette already hanging from my lips.

"No, officer," he says, "but that shit'll kill ya, ya know."

"So I've been told," I chuckle. I light my cigarette and put my Zippo back into my pocket. While inside, my hand brushes my cell phone and again I think of trying to call Cheryl. As always, I tell myself that maybe I'll try tomorrow, even though, as always, I probably won't.

As we make our way to the station, we both stay pretty quiet. I drive slowly down the ice coated streets while Old Man Winter just watches houses roll by out the window with an odd expression of contentment on his face. That makes me feel like I'm doing the right thing, no matter what really happened back there. At least the old man will have a place to sleep. At least he'll have a nice meal before he's thrown back out into the streets tomorrow. At least he'll be warm, even if it is just for tonight.

