Roadside Assistance

by Sara Catterall

On cold gray days I sit by the window of my patched-up double-wide and wait for weather forecasts on the radio. If there's any chance of freezing rain, sleet, snow, or “wintry mix,” I watch my driveway and the road. When it starts looking bad enough, I bundle up and head out the door.

My dad left me his flat-bed tow truck. It's ugly, but it runs. I know all the curves, the hills, the open fields where wind pushes you sideways and drifts snow across the road. People forget, they feel too secure, they don't understand momentum. If they're up on the shoulder waving, or I see some good Samaritan trying to help, I pull over at a safe professional distance.

I can get them out, but it'll be $125. Cash or credit. Lots of people out here can't pay that much even on a card, but with their car in the ditch and the snow coming down and me all chipper and sweet, half the time they say exactly what they do have. When we're settled up, I slap the chain on, hop in the driver's seat, and five minutes later, they're back on the road.

A few times I've felt bad, people in unwashed layers of old clothes who get that haunted stony look when they hear the price, standing quiet on the road with my red lights flashing through the sleet. Sometimes I let them keep a few extra bucks.

I'm listed, but it's hard to compete. I tried working for a couple of businesses closer to town, but as a woman, I had some negative experiences. Until this winter I did okay, but this year it never really snowed. Apart from two or three good nights, it was just a trickle of road service calls every couple days from people looking for a bargain.

Thanksgiving weekend I was visiting my mom. She got a Christmas card from the people who deliver her paper, basically asking for a tip, and on the drive home I started thinking. When do papers get delivered? About four in the morning. When do the mailmen go by? When people are at work. People send cash at

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/sara-catterall/roadside-assistance»*
Copyright © 2012 Sara Catterall. All rights reserved.

Christmas, they send gift cards. Around the towns, there's a lot of quiet roads with mailboxes you can reach from your car. It wasn't hard. Between then and New Year's I made almost a thousand dollars, going through piles of mail on my living room floor. I put the bills and junk in a laundry basket and returned them to different big blue public boxes, to be nice. All the personal mail I slit open, and it's amazing how lucky I got. Started to feel kind of warm there, all these letters and pretty cards, like you might feel sitting by someone else's family reunion at a park. I read the Christmas letters, stuck the kids' pictures on my fridge, and stood the cards up all around. They didn't need any of it half as much as me.