

The Yellow Light

The minute I stepped into the alley, it seemed colder than I had ever remembered. I had walked it hundreds of times in all kinds of weather; it provided a short-cut to the parking lot where my pick-up truck waited to rescue me from the snow and ice. The snow was most likely over its bumper by now. It looked like my small Wisconsin community had been blanketed with 12 inches since my shift started 12 hours ago.

“Not bad,” I said to myself. “That’s an inch an hour, and it beats icy rain or two inches per hour.”

I pulled my knit cap down over my ears as the wind whipped through the alley. The stiff breeze coming off of Lake Michigan was so cold and fresh I could feel my own breath freezing to the hair follicles of my nose.

“God, I hate Wisconsin!” I called out in the still of the night.

“Not as much as me, mister,” the dark figure said as it stepped out from behind a dumpster.

“Well, misery likes company but tonight I just want to get to my truck and go home,” I said, veering wide of the person who was trying to block my path.

“What’s your hurry, mister,” the stranger said, sidestepping to again block my path.

“It’s freaking cold, if you haven’t noticed. I want to get out of this weather,” I said, looking up to see who was talking to me. I put a hand up to block the icy snow flakes that swirled around me and stung my eyelids.

“Don’t you think I want to get out of the weather too, buddy?” the stranger said. “I’ve been huddling behind that dumpster for an hour. I don’t think I’ll last the night out here.”

“No this weather is fit for neither man nor beast. What do you mean ‘last the night?’”

“Just give me your coat and shut up, man!” the stranger said, this time with a little anger showing.

“Are you crazy? I’m not giving you my coat,” I replied indignantly.

“Really?” the stranger said as something hard was shoved under my arm and against my ribs. “This gun I have pressed against your fat belly thinks differently.”

“Well, I think I just changed my mind. You can have the coat, just don’t shoot me,” I said.

The gun persuaded me to forget about the weather and start paying some attention to my assailant. I quickly realized it was a young woman, maybe just a teenager. She had blonde hair tucked into the hood of a red sweatshirt that was covered by a ratty trench coat she must have found in a dumpster

somewhere. The cold had gotten after her pretty good. Her skin was taut and white, except for the areas where frostbite was starting to take effect. She was rosy red from forehead to her chin. I knew she had been outside for a good while.

“You’re in trouble aren’t you?” I started. “Did somebody hurt you? What are you doing out here with a gun and why are you pointing it at me?”

“It’s simple, mister,” she said. “If you don’t give me your coat, I’m going to freeze to death.”

“Not on my watch you won’t,” I said, but felt a sharp pain again in my ribcage.

“Then give me the coat!” she said.

“I’ll do you one better,” I said. “If you were going to shoot me, I’d already be dead. So, come with me. I’ll take you where you can find a warm bed and some food. You don’t have to spend the night out here. It’s too damn cold.”

She grimaced a little and pushed the steel barrel harder against my ribs.

“Do you think I’m a whore? Is that it?” Why I ought to...

“No! No! My brother owns the Manitowoc Motel, just down the way. He can’t give the rooms away. I’ll get you something to eat and a room until this weather breaks.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because forty years ago, I was you. I was a run-away and in trouble. An old man I tried to rob helped me out just like I’m going to help you.”

“Why would you help me?”

“Because I can, and I don’t want you to make the biggest mistake of your life. I want you to listen carefully to me,” I said, pointing to a traffic light in the distance.

“If that traffic light went from green to red without warning, there would be a lot of wrecks. It’s the same way with some decision in life. If you act too quickly, very often you have an accident. I assure you, I do not want you to have an accident in this alley tonight, not at my expense.

“So, consider me your yellow warning light. I’m giving you a chance to make the right decision and let me help you. And get that damned gun out of my ribs,” I said as I swatted her hand away from me.

The steel pipe she had been holding against me didn’t make a sound as it tumbled into the snow and buried itself.

She smiled, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Hell, you aren’t even a real bad ass,” I said as I sauntered off in the snow toward my pick-up. I stopped for a brief minute, turned and yelled, “Are you coming or not?”

She didn’t say a word, but she did follow me out to that snow-filled parking lot. It’s a good thing she did, too. There was a slight incline to the exit, and without her extra weight in my tiny truck, I might never have made it home.

I dropped Addie at the Manitowoc Motel. No questions were asked. Neither of us has spoken of that night since, although it seems as if it happened yesterday and not 12 years ago.

Addie is still there, too. My brother, Willard, discovered she was quite a short-order cook. His business has quadrupled, Addie found a home and everybody in town raves about the food at the Manitowoc Motel's "Yellow Light Diner." Now, when I walk down the alley to my pick-up I can smell all the delights she's cooking up for hungry customers.

The aromas and that light bring a smile to my wrinkled old face whether day or night. You see, it wasn't a month after our confrontation that Market Street was turned into a one-way thoroughfare. Now, the traffic light in front of the Manitowoc Motel flashes yellow all the time.

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