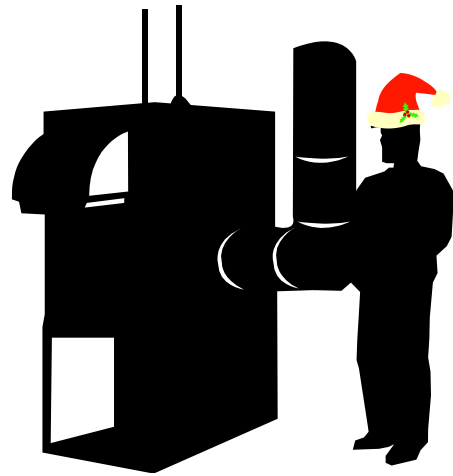


A Contractor's Christmas



Ron Armond was in a thoroughly foul mood. While no one liked working the day before Christmas, Ron couldn't blame the boss. He was the boss. Ron owned a small heating and air conditioning company and told the three technicians he employed that he would handle the calls on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. He hadn't expected much in the way of call volume. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had a call on Christmas Day.

Unfortunately, a surprise blizzard swept in. So Ron got to spend the day slipping and sliding through snow, handling no-heat calls, and generally freezing his tush. He was cold. He was tired. And any holiday spirit had long since vanished, not that he had much holiday spirit to begin with. His business was humming, but the past year had been hell for him personally. Lately, he was getting into a downright funk.

He pulled into a convenience store to get a cup of coffee before he responded to one last call. He wanted to turn it down, but his wife had been fairly insistent. She took the call and like always, managed to chat it up with the customer. "She sounds old and a little afraid Ron. You have to go." He tried arguing, but gave up.

Stepping out of the truck, Ron shivered again. Man, it was cold. He walked through the slush to the store and almost walked straight into an old homeless man.

"Have you got a little something to help an old man in the cold on Christmas Eve," he asked. There was a musical lilt to his speech and a hint of an accent, suggesting the man learned English somewhere other than North America.

Ron stepped deftly to one side and ignored him as if he wasn't there and nearly collided with a small Indian or maybe Pakistani man rushing out of the store. "Go away from here," he shouted at the homeless man. "You must leave."

"Okay, I'm going. I never come where I'm not

wanted." The man trudged off into the gloom, but not before turning and shouting, "Merry Christmas." "These people. I cannot be rid of them," muttered the store owner.

Driving conditions were miserable. Ron was driving slow and fumbling with the no spill cap on his coffee cup when he turned a corner, saw a flash of something and felt a thud against his truck. He swore and felt a wave of panic.

Running around the front of his truck, Ron saw the homeless man sprawled in the snow. The man rolled slightly and moaned.

"Hey buddy are you okay?"

"I think so. My bones are a little more brittle than they used to be." He stood up slowly, wavered for a second, and then sat down with a thump, or rather a squish in the snow. When he looked up, he had a slight twinkle in his eyes.

Great, Ron thought. Now what am I going to do? He was tempted to drive off and leave the man. No doubt the guy was waiting for him and stepped in front of his service truck on purpose. Ron sighed, "C'mon. Get in and I'll see if there's somewhere I can take you." He helped the man to his feet and eased him into the passenger seat.

"There is a right angel, you are," said the old man.

Ron crinkled his nose. "Yeah, I'm an angel alright." And a sucker too, he thought to himself.



Wow this guy stunk, Ron thought. He was probably going to have to disinfect his cab.

“Look, why don’t I take you down to the 3rd Avenue shelter? They’ll give you a hot meal and a warm place to spend the night.”

“It’s hard for the angels to travel about on a day like this,” the old man said to no one in particular. “The snow is hard on their gold lined feathers.”

“Right. The shelter it is.”

Ron started to head off to the shelter when his phone rang. “Ron Armond,” he answered.

“Ron,” it was his wife. “How long until you get to Chapple Street?”

“Uh, I’ve got a little issue here. I’ve got to stop by the 3rd Avenue shelter on the way.”

“Why are you doing that? Oh, never mind. Look, you can’t go by there. The customer just called and she thinks she’s smelling gas. I’m worried. 3rd Avenue’s ten miles in the wrong direction.”

Great. This day just keeps getting better and better.

“Alright, I’ll go straight there.” Now, he only had to figure out what to do with his passenger.

“Hey, what are you doing!” The homeless guy was sipping his coffee.

“You don’t mind, do ye? It was just a sip to take off the chill. It’s a might cold, I am.”

“Aw, go ahead. I wouldn’t touch it now. You can have it. It’s just one more thing for an absolutely rotten day.”



“Now, how is today rotten? Don’t you know what day it is?”

“Yeah, I know what day it is. It’s the day I’ve had to bust my tail in the freezing cold all day long. It’s the day I haven’t been able to find my son the one present he most wants. It’s the day I got you for a passenger. And what have you to be cheerful about anyway? You’re homeless in the middle of a blizzard.”

The man ignored Ron and sipped Ron’s coffee. “Why this is the eve of the day when Christ was born into the world. There’s something to be cheerful about.”

Ron grunted. He didn’t feel like being cheerful.

A couple of miles before the customer’s house, Ron drove by an old church. A small Nativity Scene was half buried by a snow drift in front of the church. Past the manger, the ground floor windows glowed with warmth. “Okay,” Ron told his passenger, “Let’s see if we can find a place for you to spend the night.”

“I’d rather stay here in the warmth.”

“No way. I’m not leaving you in my truck. We’re getting out and I’m locking it.”

The man followed Ron to a small side door next to one of the glowing windows. He turned to the homeless man who was stroking his shaggy beard and looking up at the stained glass and beaming. “Now you stay here and let me do the talking.” He knocked on the door.

The door cracked open to the length of a security chain and a bright, cheerful face appeared. “Can I help you?”

“Yeah, I picked up a guy who appears to be homeless and what with the weather, I thought you might have a place for him for the night.”

The door closed and Ron could hear the chain rattle. When the door opened wide Ron saw a small man in an old turtleneck sweater. “Have you considered taking him to the shelter? You know, the one

on 3rd Avenue? We don't have anything for him to eat or anywhere to sleep. We've sent all of our cots down there and everyone who can is helping out. They're very short-handed tonight."

"I can't do that. I'm on the way to a service call and I can't very well take him with me. I mean just look at him."

"Look at him where?"

"Right here..." Ron spun around. There was no one to be seen. "I, uh, I guess he left on his own."

"Well, hopefully you can find him again," the man replied.

Not if I can help it, thought Ron.

"If you don't find him, he's likely to freeze to death on a night like this. And it's a good thing you're doing. May God bless you. Now, if there's nothing else, I've got a sermon to finish."

Ron trudged back to his truck, feeling slightly better that his latest problem seemed to have fixed itself, but also a little concerned. He looked in the snow to see where the man might have walked off. Curious. There was only one set of footprints and it belonged to Ron. He made a final survey of the area and got in the truck.

"A rather pretty church, don't you think?"

Ron jumped, literally, banging his head against the roof of the cab. The homeless guy was sitting in the passenger seat humming to himself. "Wha... How did you get in here?"

The man started singing. "The first Noel..."

"Oh never mind"

"...the angels did say..."



Ron pulled up to the customer's house. It was a neat, two story house. A Christmas tree glowed in the window. "Okay, follow me," he told his passenger resignedly.

A grandmotherly sort of woman answered the door. "Hi ma'am. I'm Ron Amond with Ron's Heating."

"Oh yes, come right in. I'm Angelica Grant."

"Uh, ma'am, I seem to have picked up a helper tonight. He's homeless and I'm going to take him to the shelter as soon as I get a chance. I hope you don't mind if he hangs around with me while I take a look at your furnace. I won't let him out of my sight."

"No, not at all. It's lovely that you choose to help a lost soul on a night like this."

Yeah, lovely. Like I had a choice, he thought.

"Well, if you'll show me to your furnace."

Ron ran through his diagnostics. Every couple of minutes he turned to make sure the old man was standing next to him and not rifling through the lady's jewelry. For the most part, it wasn't too hard. He kept humming and softly singing various Christmas carols.

"Joy to the world, the Lord is come..."

Despite himself, Ron found he was joining in. "...Let Earth receive her king..."

The problem with the furnace was simple. The thermocouple was bad. He'd brought several in his toolbox, along with a few other common, universal replacement parts to minimize the trips back to his truck. As he fitted back the access door to the furnace, he noticed the quiet. Ron wheeled about. The old man was gone. Great.

As quietly and rapidly as he could, Ron looked through the house. When he found him, the old man was sitting in the kitchen with Ms. Grant eating a cookie and washing it down with milk, chatting like they were long, lost friends. The smell of the fresh baked cookies made Ron's mouth water.



“Do join us Mr. Armond. May I call you Ron?”

“Sure.”

“Chris and I were chatting and enjoying some Christmas cookies. Would you like one?”

“Uh, yeah. I guess so.”

The old man flashed a cheery smile at Ron and turned back to Ms. Grant. “And so I told the little bugger, ‘I said, give him nails, not give him ale.’”

Ms. Grant started chuckling. The old man leaned back and boomed with laughter. Ron looked confused.

Ms. Grant looked up at Ron again. “Do sit for a minute.”

“Now, Ron tell me a little about yourself. What are you doing for Christmas?”

“I plan on watching football.”

“No gifts or time around the tree?”

“Well sure. There’s that, but…”

Ms. Grant raised her eyebrows.

“Well, Christmas is for kids.”

“Christmas is for all of us,” piped in the old man.

“That it is,” added Ms. Grant. “What do you want for Christmas, Ron?”

“Nothing really.”

“Oh surely, there is something you want.”

“No, I can buy anything I need. Well, anything except the latest ‘Escape From Planet X’ game for my son. I can’t find a copy of it anywhere.”

“What about for yourself? Isn’t there something you want? Maybe something money can’t buy?”

There was one thing, Ron thought. More than anything else Ron wanted to fix whatever was wrong

with Sally, but he couldn’t. “Yeah, there is one thing.”

“Well, what is it?”

“It’s nothing anyone can do anything about. It’s my daughter.” He couldn’t believe he was sharing this with strangers. “She was riding her bike a year ago with her new puppy riding in the basket. She ran a stop sign and was hit by a car. The accident killed the puppy and put her in intensive care with a head injury. The doctors say there’s no neurological damage, but she hasn’t said a word since. She’s been in all kinds of therapy, but nothing seems to make much of a difference. She’s gone from being this really happy, inquisitive kid to someone who’s living in her own world and unwilling to let anyone else enter.” Ron shrugged.

“I see. And has she seen a psychologist?”

“Psychologists. Psychiatrists. Specialists. You name it. No one seems to be able to help.”

“Do you think it was the puppy?” asked the old man. “The bond of love between a child and a puppy is especially strong.”

Ron did a double take. This didn’t sound like the old man who had been babbling to himself all afternoon. As if he could read Ron’s thoughts and didn’t want him to suddenly think he might be lucid, the old man started humming the Halleluiah Chorus.

“Have you tried prayer?” suggested Ms. Grant.

“Yeah, I tried. But no one answered. No one was listening. I’m sure my wife still prays. I’ve given up. She probably prays about that too.”

“How do you know no one was listening?”

“My daughter still isn’t speaking and she’s still walking around like a zombie.”

“Could it be that your prayers were heard, but they simply haven’t been answered yet.”

“Sure. And it’s possible that Elvis is alive, but I doubt it.”

“I’m sorry,” said Ms. Grant.

“It’s not your fault. Thank you for the cookie, but I

really need to get moving. I've got to take my, uh, helper to the shelter for the night."

Ms. Grant leaned in and whispered conspiratorially, "I really don't think he wants to go to the shelter."

"But what can I do with him? I can't just turn him out." The thought hadn't crossed Ron's mind, but he wasn't ready to act on it.

"What if you suggested he *help* at the shelter?"

"Huh?"

"You know, volunteer, help serve dinner."

"I..." Ron turned to the old man, humming away.

"Uh, sir..."

"Chris," whispered Ms. Grant, "His name is Chris."

"Okay. Chris, would you like to help serve dinner at the 3rd Avenue shelter?"

Chris stopped singing and looked thoughtful. "Why yes, I would be love to help you. That's a jolly idea."

"Wait, I didn't mean help me. I meant help out at the shelter."

"You aren't going to help?"

"Well, I..."

"Of course he's helping," interrupted Ms. Grant, "Aren't you, dear?"

"But my family?"

"Let's call them, shall we? Perhaps they can join in. In fact, I think I'll join you. What a lovely idea. A real way to share the Christmas spirit."

Ron was sure he could hear the echo of a train whistle as he was railroaded into volunteering. He knew his soft-in-the-heart wife would applaud the idea. It was just the sort of thing she would think up on her own. He sighed and opened his mobile phone.

As Ron predicted, his wife thought it was a great idea to serve soup or whatever it was they would be doing. She agreed to meet them at the shelter. When he hung up, Ms. Grant and the old man were both beaming.

"Ron," asked Ms. Grant, "Do you suppose you could drive me to the shelter and return here? You might

think it a little silly of me, but I'm afraid of driving in the snow."

Oh good grief, he thought. This was getting ridiculous. "Well, there's not exactly room in my truck."

"Oh, of course not. You could leave you truck here and drive my car."

He sighed again. He was doing that a lot lately. "Sure, why not. Just let me put my tools back in the truck." He turned to the old man. Harmless looking or not, Ron wasn't going to let him remain alone with Ms. Grant, even for a minute. "You follow me."

On the way out, the old man elbowed him. "Ow. What did you do that for?" He pointed at Ms. Grant's Christmas tree.

"What?"

"Look under the tree," he whispered.

Ron looked. He didn't see what the old man was pointing at. "I don't see anything."

"Exactly. Now why would someone have a tree and nothing under it?"

Ron stopped and looked at the old man again, who started humming another hymn and then stopped for a second. "Maybe someone should invite her to Christmas."



Ron was surprised to find that he enjoyed himself at the shelter. He couldn't exactly put a finger on the reason. Maybe it was because he was in the midst of a bunch of really screwed up people who didn't have anything, but seemed grateful

nonetheless. The missionary, or whatever he was, who ran the shelter led everyone in a round of Christmas Carols. The crowd couldn't sing all that well, but they certainly sang with gusto. Possibly because he had spent the several hours listening to the old man singing every Christmas Carol known to man, Ron found himself joining in without restraint.

At the end of the singing, the missionary said a prayer, and then asked for every person to pray silently for the person in front, behind, and to each side of them so that everyone present would feel the power of prayer and know that others were praying for them.

Ron bowed his head with the others and offered up his first. "God, I don't know if you're listening. You don't seem to listen to me much. But then, I've sort of quit talking to you. I know these people around me are in trouble. I don't know what sort of problems they have or how they ended up here, but maybe you do. If you won't help Sally, then maybe you can help them."

When he looked up, he could see that others were still praying. Either that or they were looking at their feet waiting for the food. He bowed his head again and found himself praying as hard as he every had. He prayed with every fiber of his being for God to return Sally to him the way she was. He wanted his little girl back.

"You okay Dad?"

Ron's son was touching his shoulder. Apparently the prayer time was over and everyone was forming a line for dinner. Ms. Grant and the old man were watching Ron from across the room with warm smiles. He straightened and quickly wiped his eyes dry. "Yeah, I'm fine."

After dinner, the missionary called everyone together again. They all sat in a big circle. "This is a special night," he said, "and a couple of thousand years ago was an even more special night. Instead of a gathering like this, a group of shepherds were huddled to-

gether against the December chill, watching over their flocks." He opened a Bible and began to read...

"An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.""



When it was time to leave, Ron went looking for Ms. Grant. He found her holding Sally in her lap and talking with his wife. Sally had spent most of the evening clinging to Ms. Grant. Ron didn't object, though he did find it curious how much she took to her. It wasn't like Sally. Well, it wasn't like the Sally of the past year.

"Honey," his wife said, "I've asked Ms. Grant to join us for Christmas tomorrow." She gave Ron a look that suggested he'd better not make any objections.

He sighed again. "Sure. Would you like me to pick you up?"

"That would be lovely," said Ms. Grant.

"Hey, where's the old man?" Ron asked looking around. He hadn't seen him for some time. It was

just like him to disappear after all the trouble Ron went through to get him a warm place to sleep.

“Oh, he has other business to take care of,” said Ms. Grant

“What business?” asked Ron skeptically, thinking of business in the back of department stores.

Ms. Grant snorted disapprovingly as though she could read his mind. “It’s really none of *my* business. It’s his.”

Ron found himself sighing again.

The next morning Ron made the drive to Ms. Grant’s house. She greeted him at the door wearing a sharp brown tweed skirt with a matching suit coat, overcoat, and fedora hat with a feather stuck in it. She looked like something out of the “Sound of Music.”

Ron’s wife had been careful to open all of the Christmas presents before Ron brought Ms. Grant over. She didn’t want her to feel uncomfortable while everyone opened their presents.

After a midday Christmas dinner, they retired to the living room to watch “It’s a Wonderful Life.”

Ron’s wife surprised him by bringing out three brightly decorated presents. She turned to Ms. Grant and said, “These are for you, Ms. Grant.”

“Oh my. Thank you,” she beamed. The first present was a jar of his wife’s preserves. She didn’t give these to just anyone, and it signaled to Ron that Ms. Grant had earned a high place on her list. Next was a seashell ornament that Ron recognized. His son had made a collection of them during Sunday School. She fawned over both presents, causing Ron’s wife to blush and his son to look embarrassed.

When she started to open the last present, Sally, who had once again taken up residence on Ms. Grant’s lap, turned to look her in the face. She watched her face carefully, but without reaction as Ms. Grant opened the box to reveal a small, framed drawing of an angel.

“Oh, I love this so much,” she said, hugging Sally. “There’s never been a more perfect painting of an angel anywhere.”

Ron leaned over to his wife and whispered, “Where did that come from?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. As soon as you left to get Ms. Grant, she started drawing it.”

Ron raised his eyes, but didn’t say anything.



“And now,” said Ms. Grant, “I do believe, I have a something for both of you.” She reached into her purse and handed each child a present.

“Wow!” shouted Ron’s son, “It’s ‘Escape From Planet X’ volume 3! This is so cool. Thank you very much. Can I Dad?”

“Go,” said Ron and watched his son disappear into his room where he kept his Playstation. How did she get that, Ron wondered. He’d been trying to get his hands on a copy for a month. He watched while Ms. Grant helped Sally open her present. It was small book. He peered over at it. The book was called, “Puppies Come From Heaven.” Oh no, he thought. Just when Sally was showing an inch of progress with the angel drawing, this was likely to throw her back into her shell.

“Why don’t we read this together?”

To Ron’s surprise, Sally nodded. Ms. Grant began and read the story of a puppy who was living in heaven and got lost, finding himself on Earth where a kind little girl took care of him until his mother found him and called him home. Ms. Grant started sniffing a little as she read and reached into her purse for a tissue.

"I'm sorry dear," she said between sniffles, "Maybe you can finish it."

Ron started to object, but felt a restraining hand on his shoulder. His wife was staring at Sally with intensity.

Sally looked up at Ms. Grant, back to the book, and then started to read. "The puppy was sad to leave his little girl, but he missed his mother. The little girl was crying. 'Don't cry,' said Mommy Puppy, 'Your puppy will come. Remember, all puppies come from heaven.'"

Ron was speechless. He felt tears forming. His wife was bawling as she rushed forward to hug Sally and Ms. Grant.

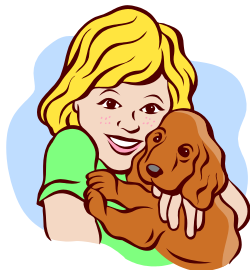
"Oh thank you. Thank you so much. Oh Sally." Sally sat and grinned. She actually grinned.

"Well," said Ms. Grant after things calmed a bit, "Now that the gifts have been presented, I think it's time for me to go home."

When Ron returned home after dropping off Ms. Grant, his daughter came running up to him, babbling out a torrent of words, "We-found-a-puppy-in-the-back-yard-and-there's-a-note-can-we-keep-him?"

Ron found himself overcome with the emotion and joy of seeing his daughter not only speak, but resembling her former self. The surprise of seeing a small chocolate Labrador Retriever flopping and tripping over his own legs coming out of the kitchen, followed by his son and wife caused him to laugh out loud.

"Wait. Stop. Slow down. Now, who's this?"



"He was scratching at the back door," said his wife. "There was a note attached. Do you know anything about this?"

Ron opened the note. It read, "The bond of love between a child and a puppy is especially strong because all puppies come from heaven." The note was signed, "Kris."

"It's just like the book," said Sally. "We need to show him to Ms. Grant. Can we keep him? Can we?"

Ron sat down. This was all happening so fast. Keep him? Of course she could keep him. He couldn't refuse his daughter anything at the moment, anything at all.

An hour later, Ron completed his fifth drive across town to Chapple Street in the past 24 hours. When they pulled up, his wife asked if this was the right address.

"I've been here enough times. Of course it's right." "It doesn't look like anyone lives here."

Ron had to agree. Instead of the trim, freshly painted house he remembered, this one looked condemned. There was no sign of a tree in the window. "Let's knock on the door anyway."

No one answered the doorbell. He peered in the windows and there was no furniture. But he'd been here less than two hours ago!

Ron shouted to a couple of kids playing in the snow next door. "Hey, do you guys know where Ms. Grant went?"

"Who?"

"Ms. Grant. Angelica Grant? She lives here."

"Mister, no one's lived there for two years."

"Look Daddy," said Sally. She was holding up a feather with gold trim along the edge. "This is just like the one Ms. Grant had in her hat."

Ron looked at the feather and the snow that continued to fall. "You know, I think this is an angel's

feather.”

“An angel’s feather!”

“See the gold trim. An angel must have lost it. It’s hard for the angels to travel in weather like this. It’s hard on their gold trimmed feathers.”

Everyone was quiet on the drive home when Sally looked up from cuddling her puppy. “Daddy, how come Santa didn’t leave the puppy under the tree?”

“How do you know it was from Santa?”

“Because of the note?”

“The note?”

“It was signed Kris. Everyone knows Santa is Kris Kringle.”

Ron thought about this for a second. Sally asked, “How come Ms. Grant didn’t give you and Mommy a present?”

Before Ron could answer, his wife turned around in her seat. “But she did sweetie. She gave us the greatest present we’ve ever gotten.”

“What? What was it?”

“An answer to prayers.”

