

Home for the Holidays

"Maybe you should find a motel and get a room for the night." His wife sounded concerned.

"I'll be fine," Eric reassured her. "It seems to be letting up. I think I've driven through the worst of it. Besides, I don't want to miss Christmas morning with the kids."

"Well, if you start feeling sleepy, or if the roads get icy, you find a place to pull over and spend the night. I'd rather have you miss Christmas morning than miss the rest of their lives."

"I will," he promised. "I've got a full tank of gas, but it's two lane roads the rest of the way so I probably won't be home before midnight. I know you're going to have a busy day tomorrow, with your folks and my folks coming for Christmas dinner, so don't wait up for me. You need your sleep."

"The kids will make sure I'm up early, too. I think it's terrible that your boss asked you to make this trip when he'd already approved your vacation."

"He wouldn't have asked if it wasn't important." Eric tried to hide the exasperation in his voice. They'd been over this before he left. "The R&D team in Batavia ran into a snag with the prototype, and the Board is meeting the first week in January. We have to give a demonstration or some of our backers might pull the plug. I was able to fix the problem with the prototype, so everything's fine now. I can take my vacation after the Board meeting."

The silence told him she wasn't happy, but she wasn't going to argue any more. "My car's blocking the pumps, so I need to get back on the road. Tell the kids I love them and I'll be home for Christmas."

"I will. We're about to hang the stockings now."

"Wish I was there with you."

"So do I."

"I love you."

"Love you too."

"Bye." The manager-on-duty put Eric's thermos on the counter and rang up the gas and the coffee. Eric paid the bill, wished the manager a Merry Christmas, and walked to his car.

The snow wasn't falling as heavily as it had been earlier, but it was still falling. It glistened in his headlights, which illuminated a narrow tunnel of swirling snow surrounded by the night's blackness. Snowflakes appeared to be rushing directly at him through this tunnel, only to swerve just before they struck the windshield. Enough did strike the windshield to force Eric to run the wipers. The wiper motor made a monotonous "R R R R R R R R R R R R" noise as it pushed the wipers back and forth, back and forth, across the windshield.

Eric guessed it had only been an hour or two since the last time a snowplow had been down this road. It was cold enough that the snow settled like fine dust on the pavement, not sticking or turning to slush. Every time a car going the other way passed Eric the snow swirled up in a dazzlingly white cloud, momentarily blinding him before it settled to the ground. There was enough traffic to keep two clear tracks in each lane, with a thin strip of hard packed snow between the tire tracks and a wider strip between Eric's lane and the oncoming lane. As long as Eric kept his tires in the clear tracks he had relatively good traction, but he had to be careful and keep his speed down because there were places where the snow had drifted across the road and there were no clear tracks. Most of the time there were trees, bushes, or snow fences to block this drifting snow, but at the occasional gaps Eric would plow through several inches of light, powdery snow. As long as he didn't panic and hit the brakes, or jerk the steering wheel, the car would plow straight ahead until the pavement cleared. Still, it was nerve wracking. He couldn't use his high beams because the glare off the falling snowflakes blinded him, so he had to drive slowly enough that his low beams would give him ample warning of snow drifts ahead.

Eric's neck and shoulders began to ache. He realized he was hunching forward, straining to peer as far ahead as possible, with his hands clenching the steering wheel. He forced himself to sit back and loosen his grip on the wheel. Logically he knew that leaning closer to the windshield would not let him see any further ahead. It was the snow swirling in the light of his headlamps that was restricting his view, not the distance between his eyes and the windshield. Emotionally, it was hard not to tense up and lean forward. The endless sea of snowflakes rushing directly at him beckoned him to get closer. The relentless cycling of the wipers counted off the seconds until disaster struck. What danger lurked just beyond the range of his vision? A dangerous curve? An impassible snow bank? A deer frozen with fear by his onrushing headlights? A stalled truck that blocked the highway? He tried listening to the radio, but the noise only irritated him. As monotonous as the sound of the wipers was, and as hypnotizing as the sight of the swirling snowflakes was, his brain wanted no distractions. It had to stay alert, focused on his limited view of the road ahead, ready to respond to any emerging threat.

He was relieved when he entered a small town. The streetlights lit up the highway and showed him there were no dangers ahead. The scattered stoplights gave him a chance to let go of the wheel, relax, and pour himself a cup of coffee from the thermos. The light poles were gaily decorated with Christmas decorations, and the windows of the closed stores brimmed with holiday suggestions. As he was leaving the town a small white church, lit from within and

wreathed by falling snowflakes, looked like a Christmas card come to life. A car turned onto the road ahead of him. A fellow nighttime traveler, it served as a pathfinder. It was the other driver's turn to peer into the darkness, searching for danger. Eric could relax and simply follow the other car's taillights.

For a while, Eric was content to follow the other car. He finished his coffee, relaxed his shoulders, and let the miles pass by. But they passed very slowly. Eric had been driving well below the speed limit when he was by himself, but this driver was going even slower. Worse still, he seemed to be slowing down as the miles passed. Before he got behind this driver, Eric had calculated that it would take him over two hours to get home. At this rate, he would be lucky to get home by New Year's Day. He decided he would have to pass.

He pulled closer to the other car and looked for a safe place to pass. He knew the headlights of an oncoming car would give him plenty of warning *if* the road was straight, but the snow prevented him from seeing the road very far ahead. The hard packed snow between the lanes hid the centerline, with its "pass/do not pass" stripes. Then, in the distance, he saw a security light on a farmhouse. It showed him the road was straight, and there was no oncoming traffic. He signaled his pass and eased into the oncoming lane, knowing the snow on the centerline would be a little dicey. Once he got back onto clear pavement he speeded up, passed the other car, and eased back into his lane. His rear wheels twitched a little as he crossed the centerline snow, but he was safely past the other car. Once again he was peering into the tunnel of swirling snow, but he was making better time. He limited himself to what he considered a safe speed, but still the headlights of the car he'd passed fell away and soon disappeared in the darkness.

Eric drove for what seemed an eternity of swirling snow and swishing wipers. The storm had appeared to be letting up when he left the gas station, but now it seemed to be snowing harder. Worse yet, the snowflakes were getting bigger and wetter. They splattered against the windshield and packed into a thick mat at the edges. Eric was forced to slow down. He saw a light in his rearview mirror which quickly grew closer and resolved itself into two headlights. Closer still, and the lights became irritatingly bright. Eric had his mirror flipped to the nighttime position, but the lights were still glaring and were positively dazzling in his side view mirror. The lights came frighteningly close to his rear bumper before they swerved into the oncoming lane. Eric slowed down to make it easier for the other driver to pass.

As the other vehicle pulled even with him Eric saw why the lights were so irritating. It was a pickup truck, jacked up so the headlights were even with his rearview mirror. The truck was barely past him when it swerved back into his lane. Eric was glad he had slowed down, as when the truck crossed the snow on the centerline it began fishtailing. It crossed back into the oncoming lane, the driver overcorrected, and it shot across Eric's lane and slid off the side of the road, coming to rest against an embankment. Eric had begun braking as soon as he saw the

truck fishtail, and he was well behind it when it shot across his lane. He turned on his hazard flashers and eased his car onto the shoulder. He stopped his car and ran over to the pickup truck.

“Are you OK?” Eric shouted through the closed window by the driver. The driver nodded his head yes, but appeared dazed. Eric saw that he was wearing his seat belt and shoulder harness. The truck must have slowed considerably as it slid through the snow before it hit the embankment, as the air bag hadn’t deployed.

The driver seemed to come out of his stupor and rolled down the window. “I’m fine,” he said. “I just can’t believe what happened. Everything was going fine, and then the truck started swerving. It all happened so fast.” He got out of the truck and started wading through the deep snow, surveying the truck. He let out a stream of profanity when he got to the front.

“Look at that!” he screamed. “Of all the *&#ing luck!” The truck had plowed through some bushes before it got to the embankment. Sticks, dead leaves, and pine needles were packed in the grill, and something had obviously poked through to the radiator. There was a hissing sound, and steam was drifting out from under the hood. Eric thought the driver had actually been blessed with good luck to be walking around after the accident, but he kept this thought to himself.

“We’re not going to be able to get your truck out of here without a tow truck,” Eric said, “and you can’t run the engine with that hole in your radiator. You’d better turn off the lights and get into my car, where it’s warm, to call for help.”

With one final curse the driver followed Mike’s advice. As soon as they were in the car the driver pulled out his phone, searched for towing companies, and began making calls. It took a few calls to find a company that answered the phone on Christmas Eve. The driver blanched when the dispatcher told him they couldn’t respond without calling the police first, but he accepted the fact that the accident would have to be reported.

Eric sat quietly and watched as the driver made his calls. Eric guessed the driver wasn’t much older than 16 or 17. He obviously didn’t have experience driving on snow or ice, and this was probably his first accident. It wasn’t until after he’d finished making his calls that the driver thought to introduce himself as “Robert” and thank Eric for stopping to help. Eric tried to make small talk and gave Robert a cup of coffee from his thermos, but Robert was too wrapped up in his own problems to do more than mumble short answers to Eric’s questions. His biggest concern seemed to be what his “old man” was going to say when he heard about the accident. Eric finally abandoned the idea of conversation.

It took over an hour and a half for the police and the tow truck to arrive. Eric guessed they were both short staffed on Christmas Eve, or Christmas morning as it was now, and the storm had probably created more work than they'd expected. He admired their dedication for coming out on a night like this. More time elapsed while the officer gave directions to the tow truck driver, interviewed Robert, and then got a witness statement from Eric. Finally he thanked Eric for stopping to help and told him he was free to go. Eric wished Robert a Merry Christmas and got a mumbled reply. Then he drove off.

The snow had lessened considerably during the time Eric was parked by the side of the road. There were still a few flurries, but no more white-knuckled driving. Even so, it was after three when Eric pulled into his driveway. His wife had left lights on for him and a note telling him there was leftover lasagna in the refrigerator, but the house was absolutely silent. Everyone was sound asleep. Eric knew from past experience that no matter how quietly he crept into the bedroom, his wife would wake up and be unable to fall back asleep. He silently eased a blanket out of the hall closet, kicked off his shoes, and stretched out on the living room sofa. He had done this before when he got home late, so his wife wouldn't panic when she woke up and he wasn't beside her. He looked with satisfaction at the pile of presents under the Christmas tree and the stockings hanging from the mantel and fell fast asleep.

The weak December sun was sending a few feeble rays of light through the living room window when Eric's daughter padded into the room in her sleeper. As soon as she saw the sofa she ran past the Christmas tree, past the presents, and past the stockings to throw her arms around his neck. "Daddy's home!" she squealed. Eric forgot harrowing drive, the accident, and the largely sleepless night as he hugged his daughter. Those things didn't matter. Daddy was home for the holidays.