

## FICTION age 10-13 (judged by Russell Reece)

### Third Place: "A Christmas Gift"

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Grade 8, Age 13

Roseville is a fun little town. The kind where everyone knows everyone, and they're all friends. There is never a dull moment in this little town, especially at Christmas time. Twinkling lights line the streets as they are strung from one lamp post to the next, looking magical as they glow and shimmer on the snow fallen ground. Children laugh and play while running in pure delight around the large Christmas tree in the middle of our small central park. There is also a humble bustle of excitement as people go from store to store with many parcels and packages. It is almost impossible *not* to feel happy while surrounded by all of this.

And last year was my best Christmas of all.

I was just walking out of the little bakery with the last of my bags full of gifts to be wrapped and gifts to be made. The sun had just fallen and the moon was out with the stars in the crisp cool night. My legs were worn-out from all of my walking and carrying.

So, I started across the street toward the park. Snow and fallen leaves crunched lightly under my boots as I went to find an open bench to rest for a bit before heading home.

Most of them were completely full from adults chatting in between shopping, but there was one open seat next to a man. As I got closer and sat down, he became more visible. He had a scruffy white beard, full of dirt and grit. His clothes were tattered, mixed, and a bit on the small side. His shoes were torn and his pale toes stuck out from the holes. His humbug expression didn't help much.

"Hello, sir, lovely evening isn't it?" I said as I sat down.

"Humph! What's so great about it?" he grumbled.

"Well, sir, it's beautiful. The twinkling lights, the laughter, the warm feeling you get when someone likes your gift, all of it."

"Ha! There, see! No one cares about the *true* meaning of Christmas. All it is is a bunch of people who want more material goods. People cling to useless possessions and forget to savor the most precious thing of all. All these people want is another holiday for more gifts and time away from their responsibilities." The homeless man said in a huff.

"Then, sir, would you kindly do me the honor of explaining to me the *true* meaning of Christmas. Could you tell me what we should savor, and what to let go of?" I asked.

"Well," He stuttered. "Well, I, uh, um..."

"Exactly, though some people do only care about gifts, you can't say that about everyone. We are all *very* different. Some people don't celebrate Christmas. Some are a different religion, that doesn't make them bad. They are still faithful, just not to the same thing we are. Would you like it if someone told you that you were bad because you didn't light eight candles?"

“With all due respect sir, I want you to hear this. I don’t see my family a lot. They work long hours to put food on the table and a roof over my head. Christmas is one of the only times I get to be with them with nothing getting in the way. So, no, it’s not always bad to let down our responsibilities for one day of the year. I do love to receive gifts, but even more to give them. Have you ever seen the face of someone when they open a gift? My heart feels light and warm. I want to sing praises to the heavens when Christmas comes. Everyone does. Maybe for different reasons, but the feeling is still there.”

There was a long moment of silence.

“Well,” He finally said. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, But for what?” I asked.

“You have given me better than the best gift anyone could ever even hope for. You, little Juliet, have given me the gift of Christmas. I thought I was in the light looking at a tragedy in the world. When in truth, I was the one in the dark. And you have saved me. And I owe much gratitude for that.”

“Oh, well, yeah...” I stuttered, blushing redder than a rose blossom. I hadn’t expected that, it felt good.

When I looked back at him, he seemed different. His beard; it was long and more billowy, cleaner even. His cheeks and nose were pink; he didn’t seem so cold as before. His tattered clothes were now a red velvet coat and pants with black snow boots. His smile was no longer rueful, it filled his whole face; A happy, plump, old man.

“Err... well, sir, have a good night. I must be heading home,” I paused. “Merry Christmas, I hope you have a good one.”

“As to you Juliet, may all of your Christmas be well.”

I trudged back through the grass and across the street towards home. I turned back once to look. He smiled a small smile, and rested his finger to his nose. And within that second, a large truck passed in front of my view to him. When I could see the bench again, he was gone. As I was walking home I realized some thing...

I had never told him my name.