

# POCKET CHANGE

Wade Rigney

JOE BASTOGNE WILLED HIS LEG NOT TO BOUNCE as he watched his potential employer read his application. He knew the marks against him, but he said a silent prayer those faults would be overlooked. It was Christmas, after all.

“Mr. Bastogne,” Mr. Westcott said, “it says here you were convicted of theft. That right?”

Joe’s throat constricted and his stomach roiled. It always came down to this: a predictable condescending tone, the beginning of the end. “Yes, but... there were circumstances—”

“There always are, Mr. Bastogne,” said Mr. Westcott. “However—”

*Here it comes...*

“—we are a *family* business, and don’t really need any help. I wish you luck. It’s a tough time of year.”

“Don’t I know it,” said Joe, rising and shaking Mr. Westcott’s proffered hand. Mr. Westcott followed Joe out, as if he would steal something.

Joe bit his lip. How he could explain to Abbey that he couldn’t get her a Christmas present because no one would hire him? Or that two years ago he had stolen a hundred bucks from his job in order to keep heating oil in the tank, so they didn’t freeze on Christmas? None of that mattered. All Abbey would know is that Daddy hadn’t gotten her anything this year.

As he stepped out of Westcott’s One Stop, Mr. Westcott stood in the doorway.

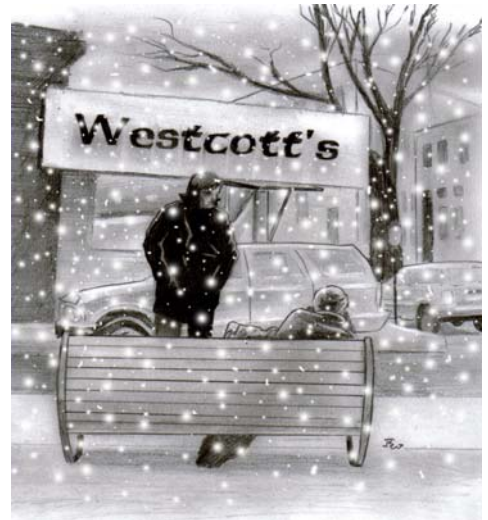
Joe had to give it one last try: “Please,” he said, “it’s Christmas, and I have an eight-year-old daughter—”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Bastogne,” Mr. Westcott interrupted with his hands up. “You should know most people aren’t going to trust a thief.”

Joe closed his mouth and looked around. Westcott had practically yelled it. There were only two people there, a man in an overcoat walking briskly by and an old bum on the park bench across the street, but it felt like Westcott had just broadcast it on the six-o’clock news.

“You’re right,” Joe replied. “But what can I do? I’m just trying to do it right this time.” There was no use yelling. West-

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*How he could explain to Abbey  
that he couldn’t get her  
a Christmas present  
because no one would hire him?*

cott saw *thief* and decided that was all to Joe. This was all Joe had seen since they'd let him out.

Snow started to fall, so Joe pulled his collar up and tucked his hands into his pockets. He crossed the street and offered the shivering bum a smile.

The bum grinned back and asked, "Could you spare some change for a cup of coffee to warm my old bones?"

Joe fished around in his pockets. His left hand came up empty, but his right had scooped up two quarters, two dimes, five nickels and five pennies.

"You're in luck," Joe said, with a genuine smile. "I think this is just enough." He put the change into the bum's cupped hands, and thought they were clean for a bum. "Merry Christmas," he said.

"And to you, young man," the bum said.

The bum crossed the street and went into Westcott's and Joe plunged his hands back into his pocket and walked on. The man who'd brushed by in the overcoat stood about fifty yards down the sidewalk, talking to an older woman.

Joe looked at the sidewalk. What was he going to do? Abbey would be heartbroken and Joe would prove himself a total failure.

Then he saw the wallet. It was not the type of wallet someone put in their back pocket, and when he scooped it up, he found it loaded with credit cards and a couple hundred in cash. It was the answer to his prayers. Now he could buy Abbey a bike and a new doll house. He could even get a regular hotel room for Christmas so Abbey wouldn't have to visit him in the halfway house. Maybe Janice would even be civil enough to join them, and they could be a family again for Christmas.

No. What would Abbey think if she knew? He had an idea whose this wallet was. Joe looked from the wallet to the man in the overcoat and back. There was a license tucked behind that credit card that confirmed it. Joe had stolen once, out of necessity, but he wasn't a thief.

The man and woman said their goodbyes and he began to walk off, at the same brisk pace.

"Excuse me, sir," Joe yelled, jogging up behind the man. "Excuse me. I think you dropped your wallet."

*The bum grinned back and asked,  
"Could you spare some change  
for a cup of coffee  
to warm my old bones?"*

The man stopped and turned around. His eyes widened with recognition. “Why, yes, that’s mine,” he said. “Thank you.” He accepted the wallet and did an instant inventory.

Joe didn’t wait around. He’d had enough of accusing eyes for one day. He trudged on, into the wind and snow, and turned down Marlowe Street toward the halfway house. Janice was out front with Abbey, who ran toward him with open arms.

Joe smiled and swallowed a miserable lump. He swept her up in an all-consuming hug. “Merry Christmas, baby,” he said. His eyes moistened. “I’m sorry I couldn’t get you anything this year.”

“Oh, Daddy,” she said, with a smile so wide and warm that it choked Joe to look at. “Don’t be silly. Mom said we came to bring you home—that’s enough for me.”

He looked to Janice for confirmation.

“It’s about time you came home, Joe,” She said.

She blurred as his eyes trickled warm tears down his wind-burned cheeks.

The door to the halfway house banged open and Mike, Joe’s roommate for the last month, stepped out holding a cordless phone. “Phone for you, Joe. It’s a Mr. Westcott.”

Still holding Abbey, Joe took the phone. “Yes?”

“The job’s yours if you want it,” said Mr. Westcott.

“I do,” said Joe, warmth bubbling up through his chest. “What made you change your mind?”

“A cup of coffee with my dad.” ☺

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## WADE RIGNEY



*“Wade Rigney” is a pseudonym. But if it weren’t, his bio would read:*

Wade Rigney was born in a small, coastal New Jersey town, and has spent much of his life since moving about the East Coast and Midwest. As a result, he can flip somebody off in sixteen different dialects, knows nothing nice in Spanish, and once peed on a skunk (and they don’t like to be sprayed either). He now lives with his wife, three children, dog (and whatever that is growing in his oldest son’s sock pile) in a remote part of the Northeastern United States.

*However, since Wade Rigney is a pseudonym, there wouldn’t be much point in all that. This is his second appearance in Flash Fiction Online: “The Sad Girl” was in the June 2008 issue, and was his first professional sale.*