

## A Christmas Story

Chris turned the key, locking the front door of 'Fitness For You!', the gym he part timed at while working his way through college. The young man pulled at both doors to make sure they were bolted, and then tugged again just to ease his mind.

God, I do that every single time, he thought. Wish to hell I could stop. Hands still on the door's push bar, he was close enough to hear the store alarm beeping away its last few seconds of grace time. Glancing at the big clock on the gym's back wall, he duly noted the time. Seven fifteen.

Seven fifteen PM, Christmas Eve. The streets of Tuscaloosa, Alabama were normally still bustling at this hour. Tonight they were fairly left to him alone. Guess they're all home, enjoying their families. Like *he* should be, Chris mused. He couldn't afford the trip home. Not even a lousy bus ticket.

Home. The very word made him more lonesome, if that was possible. There's no poor like college poor, one of his professors had declared during a lecture. Most of the class laughed. Wasn't so funny to him.

He was the poorest one he knew. His mom was barely scraping by back home, working hard and getting paid way less than she was worth. Story of her life. And their life together as he grew up. The story for way too many women, he thought ruefully. It was all she could do to pay her own rent, and help with his college a little bit. Thank the Lord he'd gotten good grades in high school. Had a natural bent for math, and ever since he could remember, Chris wanted to help *build* things.

Architecture was the obvious choice, and in the South everyone that Chris respected agreed. It was the University Of Alabama. Roll frickin' Tide. The only problem- he lived in Louisiana. Baton Rouge. LSU, Go Tigers! Do you know how much easier it would've been? Hell, he could've lived at home! Helped his mom more there. He'd be there right now. Home.

He took a good long look both ways down the thoroughfare. The rumbling in his stomach reminded him he'd eaten nothing since noon.

For a moment he wondered if he'd thought of dinner too late. Maybe two blocks away, he spotted a car easing into a space in front of the China Dragon restaurant. Wait for it, wait for it. The car's passenger pulled open the eatery's door. Yes! Way more than he would usually spend on a dinner, but hey it's a holiday, right? Right!

He made his way there with a brisk pace. Chinese buffet on Christmas Eve. Suddenly it hit him. Just like Ralphie's family in the movie "Christmas Story". Oh, this is priceless. Far rar rar rar *rar*, for sure.

His mind wandered back as his feet moved him forward. Alabama is the best thing in the long run. A few years of having nothing, and then you can write your own ticket. He made all the applications, got a partial scholarship for marching band, and a grant in aid that meant working part time on campus while also attending school. He still hadn't quite made up his mind to accept. In the end, it was his mom that finally swayed him.

The two of them, sitting there at that cheap dinette set that probably came from the furniture section at Big Lots. Chris looking at the blue eyes that his came from, trying to read the tea leaves of his future. She said,

"Son, do this for me."

It touched him like it always did. Funny, she never called him son unless she was extremely proud or awfully disappointed in him. Chris smiled. No middle ground for his mom. He replied.

"What do you mean?! If I go to Alabama, it's harder on *you*. If I stay here, the state will basically pay my tuition. I can work and help out, make things easier on you!"

"Chris, listen to me." She looked back into the eyes that had formed inside her and poured some of her heart out.

"No one in my family has ever graduated college, and none of them have the talent and ability you do either. I'm so proud of you, baby. Doing as well as you did in high school, and even more importantly, staying out of the trouble that's all around us. Chris, since you were

ten years old, it's just been you and me. Where your father is...I don't know, but I do know he hasn't been here with us, or helped us out one bit since he walked out. But understand this. It's so important to me that you be *all* you can be. That you don't just get by, that you excel. And eventually have everything you ever wanted. Go to Alabama, Chris, we'll make it work. Just like we always have."

He looked back at her, and didn't say all that was in his heart. That he wanted to do well in large part to get her out of this apartment in the hard part of Baton Rouge, to make life better for her. The day to say that was the day he could make it come true. *This* day, he just said okay. Okay, I'll go to Alabama. Chris opened the China Dragon's door, and smiled at the blast of fried everything that assaulted his nostrils.