

An AI Christmas

A story by Jan Tailor

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It was late at night a week before Christmas, when all through the mall more was stirring than janitors and mice. The mall's hallways were decked with care, in hopes that customers would soon be there.

The store owners snuggled up to their hot coco and coffee in the food court. Dreams of registers ringing from Christmases past danced in their heads. And the mall owner's representative donned an ugly sweater and the anchor store's manager in a Christmas cap, had addressed the crowd on the harsh reality of a 21st century Christmas for brick-and-mortar retail.

A gentleman in slacks and a Christmas vest openly poured Irish into his coffee. The mall owner's representative glared disapprovingly. "I'm sorry Dianne, I don't have enough to share. But Larry's Liquor is open for another ten minutes. We could get the party started. Or is it already over?"

Dianne instinctually said, "Harb, the food courts not licensed. Put it away!"

Harb shot back, "Who cares? We can add the fine to the bankruptcies of our business."

Lin stood up, "Black Friday's come then gone, and Lin's Spa is still in the red. I'm with Harb. I'm going to Larry's. Who's with me?"

The twenty or so other store owners and manager's grumbled, resigned to the notion that a party was the best option.

Standing next to Dianne, Olie the manager of Mears the mall's anchor store, sensed the mood. He quickly called a janitor over, the janitor hustled off in the direction of Larry's Liquor.

Olie whistled to get the groups attention. "I've sent Conrad to Larry's for Champagne to raise our spirits because we have a plan to save this Christmas." Heckles from the owners reminded him there's less than a week for this Christmas miracle to happen. Undaunted he continued, "Grey Oaks Mall has

survived recessions, floods, a tornado, a pandemic, and even a plague of locusts. We will survive Amazon. At our mall operators Christmas Party Dianna and I, learned of a program or app..."

Dianne interjected, "It is more of an algorithm."

"It doesn't matter what the technology is. A miracle describes it better. Martin from Mears at Hillside Mall in Valleybrook and Phillip from Mears at Town Centre Mall in Knoxville used it. Both stores had their best Christmas' ever."

Lin jeered, "Great for Mears. What about us?"

Dianne replied, "I spoke with my counter parts in Valleybrook and Knoxville, they report all the stores did well and made their rent." Discontented muttering followed the word rent that sounded like, 'that's all landlords care about.'

Olie took over, "The truth is Mears might not make its rent. Except for the hotel, I'm sure all of you are in a similar situation. We need something. This is it."

The sound of a jets roar flying over the mall after its takeoff run stopped Olie talking. A large white haired bearded man in a suit with a Garcia Christmas tie, holding a large Christmas present took a place beside Dianne and Olie. "Ho, ho, ho, merry Christmas and happy holidays. My name is Nick, I am an independent coder. I would not say what I have is a Christmas miracle. It will increase your sales dramatically, probably enough to keep you in business. It is not free. It costs three percent of the sales it creates. I cannot tell you exactly what it is, it is a proprietorial secret. But it is easy to use, just answer the email it sends you as directed. And it starts with an online contest for this." Nick unwrapped the Christmas present.

Amanda from the Luxurious Leggings spat, "A fucking Elmo V stuffy. How the fuck am I going to sell leggings with that?! The drinks better get here quick."

Miles from Comics, Decks, and Dice pipped up, "This sounds a lot like Ogdenville and North Haverbrook."

Sarah from Sleuths and Sci-fi finished, "By gum it put them on the map. What a joke."

"Hahahaha, ho, ho, oh, great Simpsons reference! I am not Lyle Lanley and I am not selling a mono-rail. I can give you a sample of what I am selling." Nick pulled his cell phone out then tapped on the screen. Before he had it back in his pocket the cell phones in the crowd began to ding, ping, vibrate, chime, and sing. "I have sent you all an email. Accept the one-time use terms and conditions. Once you do, I'm sure you will be sold."

Ooos, awes, gasps, how did it know, and words to the effect of, 'that was the gift I wanted when I was a kid,' came from all the managers. Sarah with a tear in her eye cried, "I only told Santa in an email that I wanted that because my parents might think I was a lesbian. The email went undelivered."

Nick said, "The contract to use the Christmas AI are on this table. Please, form an orderly line."

The store managers all lined up speaking of Christmases past, hopeful this Christmas would be full of cheer.

Mike wondered if there ever was a time when air travel was glamorous. Certainly, when he was younger the seats were bigger, a check bag was included in the ticket price, there was alcohol on even short hops, and if a person wore an air purifying half facemask the airline would have the person hogtied with duct tape in the aisles as soon as they donned the mask. He smiled at the person in the half face mask next to him and said, "Going home for the holidays?" Deep inside he yearned for a conversation with a stranger about Christmas to get him in the spirit.

Behind the filter cartridges, the person rolled their eyes at Mike. They turned away, vigorously looking out the window.

An announcement came over the intercom, "It is a snowy night out there. We are currently third in line for de-icing. We have at least 20 minutes before we get our turn."

Mike took his phone out to scroll through his social media while still connected to the airports Wi-Fi. A post from Ben his 8-year-old caught his eye. The Tickee Talkee was to Santa asking for an Elmo V. Ben listed off reason why he was good boy deserving of the toy. Mike remembered when he had written a letter to Santa asking for the original Elmo which he did not get.

The next post in the feed was a new story of the near riots, price gouging, and scams related to the Elmo V craze. Mike tapped his way around the internet looking for an Elmo V deliverable to his house by Christmas or within two hours of his destination. He knew it was a fool's errand, especially on the eve of Christmas Eve. The only lead he found was a seller on social media demanding ten times the store price and that he pick it up in a bad neighborhood an hour out of his way. He messaged the seller who responded almost instantly.

Seller: There is another buyer. You want, \$1300 cash. You pick it up ASAP. 5 minutes to confirm.

Mike's thumb hovered over his banking app icon. The Elmo was much more than his Christmas bonus. Looking at the balance would not change his decision. He messaged his wife, Jessica.

Mike: I found an Elmo V on the app.

Jessica: How much?

Mike: \$800

Mike's phone rang. He picked it up, "Ben can wait till after Christmas when its \$150. It's a fad. You can't make up for being away for work by buying Ben stuff. Spend more time with him."

"Jess, our tradition is to give the best gift on Christmas Eve. If Ben got an Elmo V on Christmas Eve, it would be the best Tickee Talkee video ever!"

"\$800 is two days of snowboarding Mike. Ben will remember doing that with his dad more than a doll."

"Unwrapping a snowboard holiday that's boring," Mike imitated a sarcastic kid's voice, "Lift tickets... wow."

"It is not all about the gifts. Please don't spend hundreds of dollars on some piece of plastic."

Mike's phone received a text from the seller: Now \$1500. Confirm in 5 minutes or it's sold.

Mike continued to chat with his wife, knowing she was right. The price was too much. The deal felt phishy.

An email notification for Grey Oaks Mall dinged in his in box with the subject: Elmo V Christmas Draw. The mall was on his way home. He opened the email while still on the phone with Jessica. The draw promised him 1 in 100 odds of winning the chance to buy an Elmo V. He tapped through the contests lengthy and rigors terms and conditions like a kid with a new Apple product. He finished as the plane pushed back and lost Wifi soon after. He slept or pretended to until touch down.

In the snow the airport was indistinguishable from the one Mike had departed from. His phone automatically connected to the Wifi and dinged with notifications. He scrolled through the email as the plane neared the terminal. A subject line from an email from Grey Oaks Mall caught his eye. The subject said: Congratulation – Grey Oaks Mears has an Elmo V on hold for you. He read the email which guaranteed he could purchase an Elmo V if he got to Mears customer service before Mears closed tonight at 9 pm. It was 6:12 pm, Grey Oaks was 15 minutes from the airport. He could easily get there. He started humming Little Drummer Boy as he marched through the terminal to his car. The foot of snow on his car did not slow his progress. Nor did the barely plowed long term parking lot. The gas gauge light flicked on and off like Rudolf's nose, but the gas station was at the mall. He could get gas after picking up the Elmo V.

Mike was able to park close to Mears. Inside he easily found a free salesperson to ask where customer service was. He was pointed to a corner of the store with the service desk. It looked like Santa's workshop from the 1990s. He could not tell if the display was intended to be kitsch or that the 90s was the last time the store updated its decorations. A man in a Christmas cap beamed at him as he approached the counter. A few feet from the counter the man said, "Merry Christmas Mr. Davis."

Mike responded, "Ah... yes. Do I know you?"

"No, you don't. I'm Olie the store manager," he pointed at his name tag with a big toothy grin. "The way you walked right up here smiling. Well, I couldn't help guessing you are Mike Davis. One of our lucky winners of an Elmo V. Congratulations!"

"My boy Ben is going to be so happy when he unwraps this," Mike grabbed his wallet out of his pocket. "Is it too late to have it wrapped?"

"It is quite the blizzard out there. It is snowing across the whole tristate area. The truck with your Elmo V has been delayed by the storm."

"No problem. I can pay now and come back tomorrow when it is in," Mike took out a credit card.

Olie looked serious, "I wish I could do that, but the contest rules say in the case of an on-hold prize not being at the store the winner must stay at the mall."

"That does not make any sense."

"If you would like to check the rules find the contest email and search 'delivery delay'." Mike searched the email while Olie continued, "The Elmo V is so in demand that if you leave the hold is broken and it will be sent to another store. Normally, the supply chain would have had it here now but the storm."

Mike sighed, "It is a weirdly specific rule, but there it is. When will the truck arrive?"

"The mall is open till 10 pm, there is a slim chance it will get here by then. Realistically, it will be tomorrow."

"Can I sleep in the furniture department?"

"There is no need for that. Because of this odd circumstance and it being the Holiday Season, I can give you access to the Grey Oaks Mall VIP app. This will give you amazing deals. The discounts are so low I can't discuss them. You will see when you download the app." Olie leaned in conspiratorially and whispered, "If you ask me, this is the real prize. You'll get 50% off the hotel rooms and spa. That alone is worth it."

Mike did the math in his head. A night at the hotel at the VIP rate and the Elmo V would only be twice the toys price. "Ok, I'll download it."

Olie handed Mike a slip of paper, "Here is the code to the app. You need to allow the app to use your GPS. If you leave the mall, that is cross any of the roads ringing the mall the VIP app will stop working and you cannot get the Elmo V. You can get updates on where the Elmos V is on the app by tapping on this icon. Right now, it is two cities away but stopped and there is a road closure." Mike grumble to himself. "You can find the deals here, like 60% off at the Holiday Store. Christmas ornaments on sale before Christmas, imagine that. Other deals will pop up as you walk around."

"Thanks. It has been a long day. I am going to get some food and hope the truck comes today." Mike turned to go.

"Merry Christmas from Grey Oak Mall Mr. Davis." Olie new Mike would be back for the Elmo V.

The double swinging doors to the warehouse burst open behind Olie. A hand cart with three boxes on it pushed into the customer service area. Olie recognized the size and wrapping from the food court meeting. He turned pushing the cart and warehouse person back through the doors. He yelled at the warehouse person but the Christmas music playing on the stores PA drown out what he was shouting.

An email notification popped up on Trinity's Point of Sale terminal taking her away from the Christmas freemium game she was playing. She intently read the instructions in the email and memorized the face of the person in the picture. With a step ladder in hand and a box of ornaments she hustled to the front of the store. Quickly she took the Christmas Angel off the top of one of the trees and removed some of the decorations. Then she waited for the person in the picture. She saw Mike coming from Mears about a hundred feet away from her. She put up the retro balls from the box she brought from the back, stopping to hold them up in his direction. But he was looking at his phone. She pulled the tin foil star out of the box making sure it could be seen by him while she climbed up the ladder. Still, he looked at his phone as he walked past. She needed to get his attention. She shrieked as if falling, waving the hand with the star as if she was catching her balance.

Mike turned towards the scream.

Trinity said, "I'm alright. Just gave me a scare. I'm getting too old for ladders." She held the star where Mike could see it.

"It can't be. That is the same star my family had when I was a kid. Can I see it?" Mike walked over to Trinity.

"You sure can." Trinity handed the star over to Mike.

Touching the star flooded Mike's head with memories of Christmas. When he was a kid, his family had a star much like this, with ornaments like the ones Trinity was decorating the tree with. His parents had the star and ornaments handed down from their parents. They were his favorite decorations. But when he was a teen, his brother came home drunk and knocked the tree over. The star and most of the ornaments were bent and broken beyond repair. Seeing the star so like the one from his childhood brought a tear to his eye. He said, "I will take these." He thought for a second. "Do you have two sets? My brother would love them too." He did not take a second look at the after-rebate price of over \$300. He needed retro Christmas trinkets made of foil and glass.

The latest remake of My Favorite Things played in the hotel bar. Mike drunkenly made-up new words, "Foil star on tree top and Christmas sweater on kiddo, bright sports apparel and warm gortex mittens, Christmas wrapped Elmos at Black Friday Prices, these are a few of my favorite things." He could not think of anymore words, so he hummed the rest of the tune happy to see his smiling reflection in the mirror behind the bar.

A smiling female reflection moved closer to Mike. She said, "Did I hear you singing about a Christmas wrapped Elmo?"

Mike turned to the woman who placed her drink next to him and sat down. He responded waving his phone, "Yes I did. Olie the manager has decreed that if I can stay in the mall until the delivery truck comes, I will leave with an Elmo V. Then I can ride home on Christmas Eve to present the give to my son. Ben will unwrap it on Tickee Talkee. All will be jelly of Ben. I will be the best dad ever. Until then drinks are 50% off with this app." She was still smiling and did not immediately leave after his speech so he added, "Would you like a drink?"

She finished her drink. "I would love a drink. I'm going to be the hero too. I'm giving my niece Gina an Elmo V. I can't wait to see my nieces face when I give it to her. In the meantime, I'm stuck here."

"We are stuck here." Mike extended his hand, "Mike."

"Beth," she shook his hand. "Cheers to being stuck here. It's not all bad. The deals have been to die for. With that app everything is 40 to 65% off! I got a limited-edition Monopoly game for my sister, we loved playing that as kids. A singing bass for my brother in-law. He has been pining for a new one ever since I shot his original. That sounds bad. I had a good reason to shoot it. I was coming home drunk. The thing started singing. I thought it was a burglar. I almost pissed myself. He is lucky I only shot the singing bass."

Mike chuckled. "That's weird. I bought a new set of Christmas ornaments for my bro who drunkenly destroyed our family's original decoration. The star for the top of the tree is like a better version of the one we had. The woman at the store happened to nearly fall as she put it up. If I did not hear her shriek, I would not have seen it."

“Odd, I was walking by the curio store when I hear the store clerk yell, ‘I HATE YOU, SINGING BASS!’ I would have walk past if not for that. The entire day has been bizarre. I was going to buy an Elmo V from the Social app, but the buyer kept increasing the price. Then I got the email from the mall. And here we are.”

“I had a guy saying he would sell me and Elmo V that kept jacking the price up. The seller was in Redmon, and I live in Fairview an hour’s drive out of my way. I was ready to drive all that way in a blizzard and pay more than \$1500 for the Elmo V. Fortunately, I signed up for this. Probably the same asshole. Screw him.”

“To strange coincidences,” Beth raised her glass for a cheer and drank the rest of her drink. “I found an owl necklace, like a stylish version of one I had as a kid. I loved that necklace when I was a kid; it was in every one of my Social app pictures for years. When I found this one, I had to get it. Sure, it was pricey but at 40% off how could I pass it up? Look.” She pulled her hair back with one hand, pushed her chest out letting the owl fly deeper into her cleavage.

Mike was having a hard time seeing the owl, so he lent in. But what he was looking at was as nice as the bejeweled owl.

Beth said, “They are real.” She fished the owl out of her cleavage, “The diamonds. Sometimes you have to treat yourself.”

Mike noticed the bartender in his peripheral vision, “Bartender, can we get two more drinks over here?”

Beth asked, “Are you alone tonight?”

“Yes. It is kind of a waste as I have a big room with a jacuzzi... its part of the deal from the app. The room and spa are like the price of a normal room.”

Beth lent in, “I also got some new swimsuits, 50% off. I did not get a chance to try them on. But I would love to show them to you. In your jacuzzi.”

Mike thought about it too long. He looked at his phone. A text from Jessica glowed on it unanswered. He raised his left hand to show Beth his wedding ring. “I’m sorry. I can’t.”

Beth moved back, “My mistake. I saw the ring but assumed you had split. I mean who wouldn’t invite their partner for a night at a nice hotel with a spa? That is kind of a dick move.”

Mike felt like a jerk. “You are right, I am a schmuck. Do you still want to have a drink?”

“Does that mean things are bad enough with the wife, you might want to check out the jacuzzi?”

“No. I’m texting her to come to the spa tomorrow,” Mike looked at his phone when he said this.

“It is up to you to keep that boundary. Deals at Christmas turn me on. The adult store was 60% off on the VIP app,” Beth batted her eyes one last time but might did not bite. “Just send me to my room if I start singing karaoke Christmas Carols.”

Mike got a notification on his phone from Jessica. She loved the idea. He smiled and said, “Merry Christmas Beth. You saved my marriage.”

“Don’t be so sure. The night is young, and the drinks are half off,” Beth only half joked.

Beth and Mike drank until she started singing, ‘Jingle balls.’ He walked her to her room, where she entertained herself the rest of the evening.

Coffee and Tylenol had cut through Mike’s hangover as he ate in the sun lit hotel restaurant. The weather suggested the truck with the Elmo V would be there soon. The VIP app show the truck with the Elmo V was on the move. He was looking forward to finishing his Christmas shopping while his wife was at the spa.

Mike’s phone rang. It was Jessica. She only used the phone when something was wrong. “Uh, hello hunny.”

Excitedly Jessica said, “Did you notice the cabin is at Bear Mountain?”

“What?”

“The add you sent me for 60% off all travel at Little Wings Travel Agency has Bear Mountain in the background.”

“What?”

“The ski resort from our college Christmas break trip.”

“I don’t remember,” Mike was cut off.

Jessica was fuming, “You can’t remember? You proposed to me on that trip!”

“I don’t remember sending you an ad.”

“Sure, you don’t remember. We only have two hours to get the deal. I don’t know if I can get there in two hours. Can you book it for our 10th anniversary or next Christmas? It will be so romantic.”

“Ok. But I don’t remember sending you anything.”

Jessica replied sarcastically, “Remember our anniversary is February 14th, Valentine’s Day. You picked it because it is easy to remember. See you soon. Love you.” She hung up the phone. Then took a screen shot of the text message with the ad and sent it to Mike.

Mike checked the VIP app and found a morning of Christmas Eve special for the Little Wing Travel Agency with Bear Mountain in the ad. Just then he got the screen shot from Jessica of a text he sent saying check this out with the ad. But when he scrolled up the thread of text messages, he could not find the original text. He found it strange enough to double check his text history while rushing to the travel agency.

Jessica was relieved when she saw Mike sitting at the Little Wing Travel Agency smiling. The smell of Cinnabon across from Little Wing drew her to it. She decided to let Mike finish the transaction on his own. She got a coffee for both of them and a cinnamon bun to split.

The mall was not the crush of desperate people Jessica remembered it to be on Christmas Eve pre-pandemic. It was nicely busy. People seemed happy.

A quarter of the way through the massive bun Jessica called to Mike who was exiting Little Wing, "You got the trip?!"

"Yes."

"Tell me about it!" Jessica squealed and stomped her feet under the table.

Mike shook his head smiling and sat down, "It is a Christmas Gift. You can find out tomorrow." Jessica fake pouted at him. He walked up and gave her a kiss. "I will say we got a great deal. So good that we could get some new snowboarding equipment. I got a notification from the Big Mt. Sport, Black Friday Prices on Christmas Eve."

With the coffee finished and the bun denuded of all the cream cheese icing they left the Cinnabon for Big Mt. Sports. The very young clerk at Big Mt. told them how his eight-year-old was yearning to get a snowboard and gear like influencer FrshPowPow. It turned out FrshPowPow was Ben's favorite snowboarding influencer too. They all got new gear that was recommended by FrshPowPow. The clerk told them Visa cards weren't working at his Point of Sale but said Mike's AMEX would. Mike found this strange since he had not told the clerk he had an AMEX.

"Jess, time to go to the spa treatment that came with the hotel." Mike reminded Jessica.

"I'm going to skip it. The deals from the VIP app are so good we'll save like ten times what the spa is worth."

"Ok... but we'll waste it. The voucher for Lin's Spa is only good for today."

"Let's shop!"

The VIP app led them on a nostalgic tour of the mall. Store clerks sparked memories of Christmases past at each store with a few pointed words. Wistfully, presents not gifted were purchased and treasures lost to time were rebought at deeply discounted prices. Each present obtained brought a dopamine rush of anticipation of the receivers' gratitude that was cut with serotonin from the memories of gifts past, a strong drug indeed. The sentimentality in their hearts, when combined with the perception of a deal had a card out regardless of the price of the gift. Luckily there was a gift valet service included with the VIP app to hold their stash while the shopping continued.

They had been drawn back to the food court by the VIP app. The smell had Mike stomach growling. "Hey babe, I think it is lunch time. Let's grab a bite to eat."

"I want to check out Stoner's Pot Palace," Jessica replied.

"We don't smoke pot."

"Stoner's Pot Palace sells high-end cook ware which never goes on sale. But the app says the entire store is 40% off!"

"It is almost three. I need something to eat."

“Three! Crap! Ben!” Jessica scrambled for her phone. “I have to go Mike. I have to pick Ben up from Sandie’s and take him to my dad’s. I have to get him before 3:30 cause Sandie’s off to their cabin.”

“You should have enough time. Sandie’s is only 30 minutes from here and its 2:39 pm. Get your car. I will meet you at the Gift Valet. I won’t be able to get all the gifts in my car.”

Jessica beamed, “This has been great Mike. Forget about the Elmo. Come to dad’s with me.”

“Ben needs Elmo. And we can’t pass on a discount at Stoner’s Pot Palace.”

“We need a chaffing dish to replace the one your parents lent us.”

“Who steals a chaffing dish from a church breakfast for the homeless on Thanksgiving?” Mike said rhetorically.

“Probably someone who really needs food and money,” Jessica answered. “Or we forgot it and someone else took it home.”

Mike passionately kissed Jessica then said, “I won’t forget the chaffing dish.” Jessica ran for her car and Mike dashed to the Gift Valet. Both sparkling with purpose.

Having assisted Jessica get the horde of presents into her car, Mike had a long lunch before returning to Stoner’s Pot Palace. He went right up to the counter at the cookery store. The clerk grabbed for the phone but dropped it. The clerk retrieved the phone quickly and started talking into it loudly, “Yes, we have chaffing dishes.” The clerk looked confused and moved to his computer terminal. In the same overly loud voice, the clerk spoke in a monotone, “That is a shame. Who would steal a chaffing dish from a charity dinner? Do not read this pause for a... oops!” The clerk went red faced. “Worse, you borrowed it from a friend. We have what you are looking for. I will keep one here for you and give you a discount. Merry Christmas.” The clerk pressed the button on the cordless phone to hang it up. The phone made the dial tone noise, until the clerk pressed the button again.

Mike was astounded, “That is the most amazing coincidence! I had a chaffing dish stolen from our church Thanksgiving breakfast. Stolen might be too harsh. It went missing.”

The clerk responded dryly, “Criminals will steal anything.” Then showed Mike their selection of chaffing dishes. Mike selected a suitable dish and they proceeded to the Point of Sale to complete the transaction.

Mike was thinking how nice it was that Sandie took Ben so often. He remembered she was a fan of birds and tea. She would love the bird tea set behind the till. He pointed at the tea set and asked the clerk, “Can I get that too?”

The register printed the receipt for the chaffing dish and a ding came from the point-of-sale computer. “Uhm, awe, humm... sorry... awe, I have to read this email.” Leaned into the computer reading intently but looking more confused. “Your transactions complete...”

Mike assumed it was to do with the VIP app only allowing one discount transaction. “Don’t worry about the discount. I have a friend that would love that.”

The clerk squirmed uneasily still looking at the screen. “Uhm... just take it.”

“Are you sure? I don’t care about the discount.”

The clerk turned grabbing the tea set and thrusting it out to Mike, “It is on clearance and not priced right. It is our gift to you on Christmas Eve.”

“That is very generous. Merry Christmas!” Mike could not believe the service. He thought, never again would he use Amazon.

The intercom in the mall called out there was only one hour of shopping left. Mike looked to his phone for a notification regarding the Elmo V. There was no notification. The Elmo tracker show it outside of Mears, hopefully being unloaded from the truck.

The VIP app flashed a notification that Comics, Decks and Dice was 60% off. He had not been to a comic bookstore since he was a teen. He had loved playing Magic the Gathering, but it became too geeky for him in high school. He walked into the store certain he did not want anything there.

As Mike entered the store, Miles the owner of Comics, Decks and Dice put a sign on the till saying debit card or cash only then started shuffling a Magic the Gathering (MTG) deck at the counter.

Mike perused the graphic novels and RPGs but none stood out for him. He laughed to himself at the picture of an Amazon Warrior defending a unicorn from a dragon. He thought the picture could be right off the side of a molester’s van. All of this seemed so juvenile to him.

Miles loudly shuffled the deck as Mike came up to the glass counter. Multitudes of cards where in the glass counter. Miles spread the deck out on the countertop. Mike saw the first card of the magic the gathering deck, a Kurd ape. Mike said, “That looks like the agro deck I played when I was a kid. I saved up my chore money for a year to get me an Unlimited Taiga dual land. If I got the right cards in the deal, I would always win.”

Miles whistle slightly, “You had an Unlimited Taiga? That card can go for a thousand dollars today.”

“Really? That much?”

“MTG is played professionally now. Not long ago, an Alfa Black Lotus (card) sold for a half million dollars.”

Mike was shocked. He remembered how much he loved playing Magic the Gathering. He stopped playing because his dad teased him. His dad said he would never get a girl friend or a good job playing with magic cards. He stopped playing when a girl in his junior high called him a nerd for playing it. Now that he knew of the money involved, he wanted to teach Ben to play. He saw his smart kid Ben playing it professionally, it would just take practice. They could practice together.

Miles laid out what he thought was a great starter kit for a Magic the Gathering prodigy. Mike was sold and took out his Amex.

Miles pointed at the sign on the register, “Sorry Mike, it’s been a strange day. Debit cards are the only cards working today.”

Mike switched cards. “No problem. I haven’t been to the mall often in the last few years, but I certainly have liked the Mears promotion for the Elmo V. It has not seemed that busy. How has your Christmas season been?”

“It has been surprisingly steady. Not as busy as years past but people are buying more.” Miles changed the topic, “If you ever want to cash in that Unlimited Taiga keep me in mind or any of the old cards.”

“I doubt it but if I do, I will talk with you. Merry Christmas Miles.” Mike walked out happy to have reconnected with a game he loved. He had barely stepped into the mall when his phone got the final notification from the VIP app. The Elmo V had arrived at 5:45 pm on Christmas Eve.

Mike strutted to the Mears knowing that within a couple hours he would be at home watching Ben unwrap the perfect gift with many more to open in the morning. As he paraded into Mears, he nearly collided with a woman mostly hidden by a wrapped box and encumbered by many shopping bags. “Ohh sorry Mike, I did not see you! Look I got the Elmo V. I’m the best aunty ever!” Beth said as she continued out of Mears.

“I’m on my way to get Ben’s Elmo V, just in the nick of time,” Mike said this as he passed Beth. With long strides he was at customer service in no time. But he was greeted by a short line. Three people were in front of him. He pulled out his phone to text Jessica. The line was one shorter by the time he texted about it. The ecstatic customer left with a wrapped box that must contain an Elmo V. It took about five minutes for Olie to ring in the customers in front of him. Each customer left happy with that familiar wrapped box. He stepped up to the customer service desk.

“Mr. Davis, I have your Elmo V right here. Unfortunately, the only payment option we have is debit.” Olie picked up a box from a dwindling stack behind him and placed it on the counter sideways. He un-taped the wrapping exposing the Elmo V’s clear plastic packaging showing the product like a drug dealer would. Giddily, Mike nodded approval and took out his debit card. Olie re-taped the box.

“This has been the best shopping experience of my life. The VIP app made everything simple. All the gifts fell into place. I scored huge points with the wife by getting a trip to the resort I proposed to her at for 60% off. It was worth it without the Elmo V.”

Olie focused on the point of sale as the line was growing. “It has been a very good promotion. This will be our best holiday season in years. It has really reminded people of what Christmas is about.” He pushed the terminal to Mike for payment.

Mike skillfully entered his pin paying for the Elmo V. He grabbed the box. “Merry Christmas!”

Caring the wrapped Elmo like a gigantic football, Mike made his way to his car. The car was frozen and snowed in. It took a few minutes to defrost the windows. He noticed the low gas light. He would have to fill up as soon as he was finished at the mall. It was slightly past 6 pm when he got to the gift valet. He was out of there in minutes. He left the valet with the few dollars in his wallet and change in his car.

Mercifully, the gas pump was somewhat sheltered from the wind and snow. Mike stepped into the cold to fill his car with gas. The falling snow damped the sound of cars on the road. A Blue Christmas played on the gas station intercom. He tried his Visa Card in the pump. It was declined. He tried again. It was declined again. He tried his Amex. It was declined. He tried his debit card confident the station was having the same problems as the mall. It was declined.

A Blue Christmas faded out and a voice crackled on the intercom, “Sir, is there a problem?”

“My cards don’t seem to work. Is your system down?” Mike replied.

“It has been working all day,” the staticky speech was replaced with the melancholy tune of Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.

Mike took out his phone to open his banking app. The Visa did not have a dollar of credit left. Neither did the Amex. The debit card was in debt with the overdraft spent.

Ben would not unwrap the perfect gift on Christmas Eve for adoring followers on Tickee Talkie. Mike was not sure if his marriage would survive Blue Monday.

In shock, Mike gazed into the blowing snow listening to the music unsure of what to do. Judy Garland sang,

“Someday soon, we all will be together
If the fates allow
Until then, we'll have to muddle through somehow
So have yourself a merry little Christmas now”