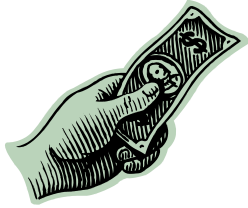


Only A Dollar's Worth

Herma Werner

It was Mr. Watts again.



Isabel sighed and grabbed the hose. She took the cap from the gas tank and called through the car window. "A whole dollar's worth again, Mr.

Watts?" She knew she sounded nasty, but she didn't care.

Mr. Watts got out of his old car. "Watch your smart mouth, little girl," he said. "You ought to know by now what I want. Maybe you ought to get a job a girl can do right."

Isabel knew the whole routine from start to finish, including the insults. Mr. Watts watched like a hawk as she ran a dollar's worth of gas into the tank. He didn't take his eyes off her. He watched to make sure that every drop of gas he paid for got into the tank.

Then the old man opened a beat-up wallet and fished out a dollar bill. He held on to the money as if it were a fortune in diamonds.

"Get that windshield clean," he said. "And the rear glass, too. How come I have to remind you every time? The boy that was here before never forgot."

Isabel looked at Mr. Watts with scorn. Every couple of days, he came around for a dollar's worth of gas. For a dollar, he felt he was entitled to a windshield cleaning - front, rear and sides. His dollar's worth included water in the radiator once a week. And water for the battery once a month.

Every two weeks, Isabel gave the old car an oil check. But if the car needed oil, Mr. Watts would order it from an auto-supply store. Then he'd have his grandson add it for him. "Cheap!" Isabel thought to herself. She wished the old man could read her mind.

She finished polishing the glass. "Ok, Mr. Watts? Is that the way you want it?" she asked.

Mr. Watts shrugged and gave Isabel the money. "Do I have a choice?" he muttered. He climbed back in his car and drove off at about ten miles per hour.

Isabel turned and saw that her boss, Mr. Kirkland, had been watching. She handed him the dollar bill.

"Mr. Watts just paid off your mortgage," Isabel said sarcastically. Mr. Kirkland laughed, but Isabel just looked disgusted. "Why do you put up with him, Mr. Kirkland?" she asked.

"Oh, he's been doing that for years," Mr. Kirkland said. "He's old. He has nothing else to do all day. Let him have his fun."

"I wish he'd have his fun with somebody else," Isabel said. She had been working at Kirkland's Gas Station for a few months. She liked the job, but she had come to dread the sight of Mr. Watts. "I know he's not broke," she went on. "I heard he has a lot of money."

"Not true," said Mr. Kirkland. "Mr. Watts has a small pension. If he didn't live with his daughters, I don't know what he'd do." He

turned to go back to the office. "Don't let it get to you, Isabel," he added. "It's just one of those things. There's nothing you can do."

"No?" Isabel thought to herself. "Just once I'd like to tell that old cheapskate what I think of him. I bet we wouldn't see him again after that."

She went back to the pumps. And there, right where the old man had stood, Isabel saw it. It was green and beautiful. It was a \$20 bill. She scooped it up and stared at it for a while to make sure it was real. She figured that it had to belong to Mr. Watts.

She looked down the street. Mr. Watts would be coming back for it any minute. Quickly, she stuffed the bill into the pocket of her jeans.



Half an hour passed. Mr. Watts did not return. After an hour, Isabel felt that the \$20 was really hers. She began to make all kinds of plans for it. She could see herself adding

it to the money she'd saved for a car. After an hour and a half, she had switched to buying a new jacket. After two hours, she watched herself listening to the new CD's she wanted. Just then, Mr. Watts came driving into the station.

Isabel slipped a hand into her pocket and touched the bill. There was no way Mr. Watts could know she had it. After all, he could have lost it any place. She thought of all his insults - about girls working at gas stations, about how dumb she was. Maybe

he deserved to pay for the way he treated her.

The old car sputtered to a halt in front of the gas pumps. Isabel stood with the hose in her hand. For the first time she really noticed the torn upholstery inside the car. She got a look at the old empty crate that always sat in the backseat.

Mr. Watts got out of the car. He seemed even slower than usual, and he stared down at the ground for what seemed like a long time. Then he looked hard at Isabel.

"Listen here, Missy. That wasn't a dollar bill I gave you before. It was a 20."

Isabel felt her face grow hot. Why was he always so quick to blame her and put her down? He must know he gave her a dollar. So why lie about it? All of Isabel's doubts dissolved. Now she knew she had a right to the \$20, but she was afraid he might make her empty her pockets.

"You give me the same thing every time you're here, Mr. Watts," she said. She met his eyes and stared him down. She was telling the truth, and he knew it.

"Today was different," said Mr. Watts. "You forgot to give me change, Miss Know-It-All. I want my money."

"You gave me a dollar bill," Isabel insisted. "That's the truth."

Mr. Kirkland came over to them, wiping his hands on a rag. "What's the trouble?" he asked.

"When I was here before I gave this ... girl

of yours a \$20 bill. She didn't give me any change," Mr. Watts said.

"No," Mr. Kirkland said. "Isabel handed me the money right after you left. It was a dollar bill. You're wrong, Mr. Watts. I hope you're not calling me a liar?"

Mr. Watts stared at Mr. Kirkland. Then he shook his head sadly and seemed to fold up into a tiny gray package right before Isabel's eyes. She tried to blink away the image, but it stayed.

She had never thought of Mr. Watts as anything but mean and cheap and nasty. But suddenly, she understood him better. She was young and strong and able to do what he considered a man's work. He was old and poor. He didn't like buying a dollar's worth of gas at a time. He had to be frugal. But he still had pride, so he covered up what he had to do with a lot of noise.

Isabel went over to the old car. She opened the door and looked into the back where the crate was.

"Hey, you, get out of there!" Mr. Watts called. It was the old nasty voice, but Isabel heard something else under the sharp words. Fear.

She stood up and turned. The \$20 bill was in her hand. "Is this what you're looking for?" she asked. She walked over to the two men.

Mr. Watts grabbed the bill and waved it under Mr. Kirkland's nose. His voice was loud and mean again.

"See?" Mr. Watts said. "I don't go around saying things that aren't true."

Without even a thank-you, he climbed into his car and drove away. Mr. Kirkland gave Isabel a long, thoughtful look.

Isabel felt her face growing hot again, but she returned the look. After all, her only crime had been to dream a little.

"Think he'll be back?" she asked after a while.

"He'll be back," Mr. Kirkland said.

"For a dollar's worth?"

"I'm afraid so," laughed Mr. Kirkland.

And this time, Isabel laughed, too.

