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An INCONVENIENT CHRISTMAS



The Winsteads were preparing for a trip to Grandpa's house.

It was early in the afternoon of Christmas Eve, and Celeste was packing up a few snacks and such for the trip to the country, while her husband James urged the two kids to hurry on up a bit. The day had really gotten away from them and they were leaving much later than originally planned.

"We are burning daylight here. Let's go, slow pokes," he yelled from the bottom of the stairs just hoping that he was being listened to. Any attempt at a positive response would be welcome.

"Coming, Dad!" came the positive response from seven-year-old Melissa.

"What about your brother?" James asked.

"He is being a turkey," laughed the beautiful raven-haired little girl. "But I think he is almost ready."

"Gobble, gobble!" laughed the voice of Melissa's eleven-year-old brother, Sam. The boy was in his bedroom that was also known as NASCAR Headquarters. The sign that hung on the outside of his usually closed door simply read, "PIT AREA — KEEP OUT!"





“I’m comin’, Dad,” Sam replied from deep within the “pit area.”

Melissa and Sam Winstead were really excited about seeing old Grandpa Luke. He lived on a farm about two hours out of town. The ride was kind of boring, but seeing ol’ Lucas (as their father called him) was always well worth the trip. Besides, he may even have some cool presents this year, but that was doubtful. Grandpa just didn’t leave the farm very often since Grandma Emma passed away a few years ago.

“Honey, would you go outside and get the mail?” asked Celeste. “I think it’s been in the mailbox for a couple of days now.”

James put on his favorite down jacket which was “really toasty” and walked down the driveway toward the mailbox. The ground felt all crunchy from the morning frost.

The Winsteds lived in a beautiful little

subdivision outside of the big city called Sandy Cove (although there wasn’t any sand or even a cove to be found anywhere). The houses here were very nice and very affordable as well. The two-story, red brick home with the quaint little backyard and decent-sized front lawn looked a bit like all the others around it, however the Winsteds were really quite happy here. The schools were good and the neighborhood seemed safe. The mall wasn’t too far away and the neighbors were nice. James was a very successful accountant and business was pretty good these days. James Winstead thought that life was good and at Christmas time, life was *great!*

He walked by the plastic Santa Claus and reindeer that adorned his now icy lawn and stopped for a moment to adjust Rudolph. He wasn’t pointing in quite the right direction. “There now, that’s better,” thought James as he whistled a chorus of the red-nosed reindeer song.





James brought the mail in through the garage door that led to the kitchen and placed the small stack of mostly catalogs on the counter. The kids ran by in a colorful splash of bright outerwear.

“Button up, kids; it’s really cold. There’s frost on the old pumpkin this morning,” he said as he kissed his wife on the cheek. “Love you, Honey!”

“I love you, too, James. Merry Christmas. Thanks for taking us to see Dad today. He gets really lonely out there on that farm since Mama died,” Celeste whispered.

“Hey now,” cooed James. “It’s always nice to see him. I love that old man as much as you do.”

The Winsteads had formulated a plan. They figured they would drive out to see Grandpa, have dinner with him at the farm and return home in time to get the kids off to bed early enough so as not to interfere with the arrival of Santa Claus. Then, tomorrow, just the four of them would enjoy Christmas morning together.

They would gather around the Christmas tree in the living room, open presents, shoot home movies, and listen to Christmas music on the stereo. Then, they would eat a nice turkey dinner with all the fixin’s.

Later on, some friends would arrive. The kids would play with their new toys and the adults would laugh and tell stories of Christmases past while watching football on television. There would be snacks and smiles and a good time would be had by all on this festive Yuletide day.

Oh, what a storybook time. Middle America at its very best, except for the fact that the Winsteads were about to come face-to-face with a very inconvenient Christmas. Absolutely *nothing* would go as planned.

It all started to go downhill with the reading of the mail. James was carrying some things out to the family Jeep Cherokee when Celeste called out to him.

“You have a problem here with Shopazon-dot-com,” she yelled from the kitchen.

“What? How could that be?” replied James as he entered the kitchen and picked up the dreaded letter that his wife handed over for him to read.

The message was very clear and to the point. “The Christmas gifts you ordered aren’t in stock. They have been placed on backorder and will arrive on January 15 unless you cancel this order by December 24. Thank you for shopping online at SHOPAZON.COM and have a MERRY CHRISTMAS!”

“Huh?” cried James. “Didn’t Charlie, the UPS guy, deliver these packages the other day?”

“I don’t think so, Hon,” answered Celeste as she rifled through her catalogs.

“I saw four big boxes on the front step three days ago. I assumed that they were from Shopazon,” James said as his stomach began to churn. “I figured that I would wrap them up tonight.”

“Oh, no, they were my orders from Spiegel,” replied Celeste.

“But those boxes were huge! Are you sure?” James asked, although he already knew the answer.

“My stuff, Hon,” exclaimed Celeste with a sad tone in her voice.

“New sheets and a bedspread and pillow shams for the holidays. No Shopazon. Sorry.”

“Oh man. The one year that I buy all my gifts on





that darn computer and this happens!” James was almost in tears. He had purchased a necklace and a set of earrings for Celeste. A complete Christmas Barbie set which included five outfits for Melissa, and a Michael Waltrip jacket, as well as a model of Michael Waltrip’s NASCAR racecar for Sammy. He had also ordered a new Sony Playstation 2 with games for each of them, including a “John Madden Football” game for himself. Also, now on backorder were several DVDs and a new cutting-edge digital DVD player for the entire family.

I was going to be a hero and now I am going to be a goat, thought James. *Perhaps Wal-Mart or something will be open late tonight and we can stop there on the way home from Grandpa Luke’s. Yeah! That’s the ticket!* The thought made him feel a little better, but not much!

Celeste interrupted from inside the Cherokee. “James, let’s go! We are burning daylight here.”

Sam and Melissa were laughing from the backseat.

“Come on, Dad!” yelled Melissa.

“While we are still young,” laughed Sam, utilizing one of his dad’s favorite expressions.

James Winstead climbed behind the wheel and proceeded to back out of the garage. He made his usual move left and drove on out of the driveway. Once outside of Sandy Cove he turned north on County Route 52 and headed the Cherokee toward Grandpa’s farm. James sat grim faced and quiet as he drove.

He was still mad at pretty much the entire Internet. The kids argued loudly in the backseat as to whether or not cows faced the same direction on purpose and Celeste just stared out the window watching the frosty countryside of her own childhood fly by the window. *I have to get that turkey in the oven around 4 a.m.,* she thought. Then she looked up at the sky and turned toward her husband. “Looks like a snow storm coming, Hon. The sky is getting really dark!”

James grunted!

The blizzard hit without warning — a regular whiteout. James could hardly make out the road in front of him. The snow was falling fast and hard at a fierce angle right toward the windshield. He slowed the SUV down as much as he could. He still had to maintain a little speed so that no one would crash into his backside. Bright lights didn't work at all. They just reflected back in his face and made things worse, so James had to be content with his lights on dim and the fog lights.

“Oh, wow! It's like the North Pole, Dad,” said Sam.

“Don't hit Rudolph!” cried Melissa.

“You kids be quiet so Daddy can concentrate on his driving,” said Celeste who was more than a little concerned.

Then she noticed something that looked like smoke rising from the hood.

“What is that, James?” she asked.

“Nothing, Celeste,” answered James. “Just the snow melting on the hot hood.”

“Oh. What does the temperature gauge say?”

James looked down at the dashboard. *Women!* he thought.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhh, the thing is locked on red! The engine is about to blow!”

James could barely make out the sign ahead through the blanket of falling snow.

Bub's Garage

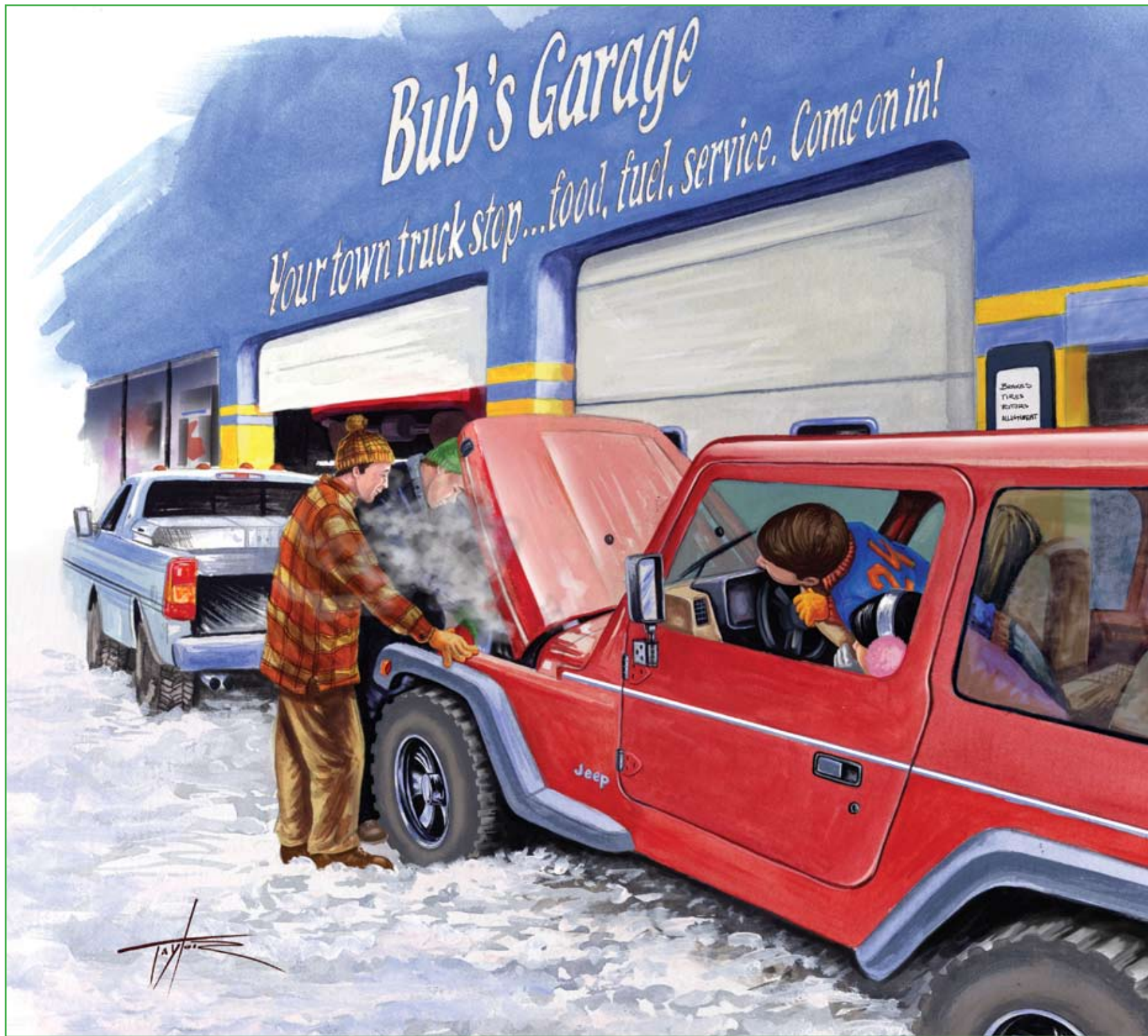
Your Town Truck Stop

Food, Fuel, Service

Come on in!

He remembered the place. *Thank God*, he thought as he slowly pulled into the icy driveway of Your Town Truck Stop. He drove the smoking Jeep Cherokee up to a closed garage door and beeped the horn.





“Turn it off!” yelled a man dressed out in a pair of Blue Carhartt coveralls. “Off!”

His white nametag that was stitched just above his heart simply read, “Bub.”

At Bub’s command, James immediately switched off the engine. Now, the only discernible sound was a loud and steady hiss that erupted from deep beneath the hood of the Cherokee.

“James Winstead has pulled into Pit Row,” announced Samuel from the backseat in his best NASCAR voice. “That car is in a heap of trouble, race fans!”

James, Celeste, and Melissa just couldn’t help laughing out loud at Sammy. Besides, what more could go wrong on this “happy” Christmas Eve?

James got out and raised the hood and Bub started investigating.

Celeste told the kids to stay right there with Daddy and proceeded to walk through a side door

that led her into the restaurant and convenience store section of the truck stop. She had seen a sign that read “Homemade Christmas Eggnog” as they pulled in. There were only a few folks in the entire place and a red-haired girl named Margie filled her order of five eggnogs. After a “Merry Christmas,” a good tip, and a wave, Celeste headed back out front where she found Bub holding something in his hand. It looked somewhat like a dead snake.

With a dark expression on their faces, the kids and James were all peering at the fried piece of rubber in Bub’s hands.

Bub was speaking in a hushed and seemingly reverent tone of voice as Celeste passed out Styrofoam cups full of hot, truck stop eggnog to each of them.

“You know those commercials on TV where they tell you that your heart is just fine . . . until it isn’t? Well, it’s the same with a fan belt,” said Bub.

