

Second Chance Christmas

“I knew you wouldn’t make it. It’s always something with the cars, isn’t it?”

Bill Kingman sighed in resignation. Even when they were still married, he knew it was hopeless to argue whenever the subject of his cars came up. She was convinced his old cars were the most important thing in his life, and nothing he could say or do ever changed her mind.

He took a deep breath, and tried to keep his exasperation from showing. “Mary, I didn’t say I wasn’t coming. I said I’d be late. And this has nothing to do with my old cars. I was driving the Toyota, and somebody smashed the front end. It was leaking anti-freeze all over the street. I can’t drive it until I get the radiator fixed. That’s going to take another hour or two. ”

“Why don’t you just rent a car?” Mary asked.

“There isn’t a car rental place in the entire town. This is literally a one stoplight town, and I was waiting at that light when an old man cut his turn too short and clipped my car. I was lucky to find a repair shop. Most places are closed on Christmas Eve.”

“Where are you?” Mary asked. There was still an accusing tone in her voice.

“It’s a town called Fulton. About twenty miles short of Bainersville.”

“Bainersville!” Mary almost spit out the name. “That’s three hours from here! I’m not going to hold dinner. I won’t make Jason wait for dinner because his father is playing with a car in Bainersville.”

“I didn’t expect you to.” Bill said patiently. “That’s why I called to let you know I’d be late. They’re pulling my fender out now, and they’ve got a radiator shop patching the hole in my radiator. I’ll call you when the car’s fixed and I have a better idea when I’ll be there.”

They said their good-byes and Bill slipped the phone back into his pocket. He peered through the grimy window in the door that separated the shop from the customer waiting area. A man was pounding on his fender with a hammer, trying to straighten it to the point where they could put a headlight back in. Bill sat down in a plastic chair and picked up one of the three magazines in the waiting room. He leafed through it absently, hoping maybe he’d find something he’d missed the first couple of times he looked at it. His mind wasn’t really focused on the magazine, though. His thoughts kept going back to the phone call, his marriage, and his life.

Deep down, he realized the divorce was mostly his fault. Mary wasn’t suspicious and bitter when they first got married, but he didn’t know how to live with another person. When you got right down to it, he’d pretty much been a jerk. Nothing ever suited him.

He was always busy working on something, and they never took time to have fun together. He was too busy replacing the tile in the kitchen, or regrouting the tub in the bathroom, or resodding the yard. And then there were the cars. He'd buy an old car and talk effusively about the fun they were going to have taking it on tours, or driving in parades, or maybe just going on a picnic. Only the transmission wasn't quite right so he'd pull that out. Or the guy who owned it before him did a crappy paint job so he'd have to strip it down to repaint it. And then he'd discover it had the wrong headlights for that year. Or the speedometer had been taken from another car. Soon he'd find so many flaws that he'd sell it in disgust and buy another car. This one was sure to be better, he had promised Mary. They'd have fun driving this one.

When Jason was born he tried to be a good father, but his idea of being a good father was showing Jason the right way to do things. They never just played catch. They'd practice pitching. Or have batting practice. No wonder the kid hated sports.

Bill stared out the window at the cold, wet snow that was falling haphazardly in the glow of the streetlight. It wasn't even five o'clock yet, but already it was getting dark. The gutters on either side of the empty street were clogged with brown slush. Little rivulets of water ran down the street and flooded the potholes. Bill knew the water would freeze to ice as the night deepened. The ice would make driving difficult.

He felt a cold gust of air on his back as someone opened the door behind him. It was a kid in an old Air Force field jacket. He looked to be a teenager, but might have been in his early 20's. A tattered stocking cap was pulled down over his stringy blond hair. The kid almost shuffled, like an old man, as he walked to the coffee pot in the corner of the waiting area. He poured some coffee into a Styrofoam cup and sat down in the chair closest to the door, like he was ready to make a quick exit.

Bill turned back to the magazine, but soon tossed it back on the table and stared out the window. The snow was now mixed with sleet. The kid next to the door started snoring softly. Bill noted with disgust that his field jacket still had all the insignia and rank on it. It was almost 20 years since Bill had left the service, but he was still bugged by people wearing a uniform improperly. He'd chewed his son Jason out for that several times, when Jason tried to wear Bill's old BDU's. "You can leave the name tag on because the military doesn't own your name" he'd lectured Jason, "but everything else has to go. Otherwise you're impersonating an officer."

"Mr. Kingman?" The service manager was calling him from the door that led to the shop. We got your radiator back. Do you want to look it over before we install it?" Bill really had no desire to inspect the radiator, but he was tired of sitting so he got up and walked into the shop.

"You've got some kid sleeping in your waiting area" he said as he entered the shop. The manager took a quick look into the waiting room.

“We get all kinds in here.” He said. “Usually they just want to drink our coffee and read a magazine. If the weather’s nice I’ll chase ‘em out. I mean, we ain’t running a flophouse here. But, on a night like this. . .” He shrugged and left the sentence unfinished.

The radiator looked fine to Bill. He stood back out of the way and watched them install it. There were signs that said “No customers allowed in the shop area” but no one asked him to leave and Bill was tired of sitting in the waiting area. The service manager and one mechanic were the only ones left in the shop. Everyone else had left at five, or maybe a little earlier. It was Christmas Eve, after all.

It didn’t take long for them to finish mounting the radiator. Then they removed the jack stands and lowered the car back onto the floor. It was immediately obvious that the left front tire was flat. Swearing under their breath, the two men jacked the car back up and examined the tire.

“Here’s the problem” the mechanic said. He pointed to a scuff mark on the inner sidewall of the tire. “The crash must have pushed that fender bracket into the tire. It’s not touching now, though.” He looked up at Bill. “Did the tow truck driver pull this fender out before he towed you?”

Bill nodded yes. “He said he didn’t want the fender to rub the tire.”

“That’s why we didn’t notice this when they pulled the car in here. Must be a slow leak. Looked OK before we jacked her up, but she’s flat now. Can’t patch a sidewall.”

The service manager straightened up. “How’s your spare?” he asked.

“Never looked at it.” Bill answered. They opened the trunk. The spare was a little “space saver” tire. It looked like a large doughnut.

“That’ll get you a few miles.” The service manager said. “How far away do you live?”

“I live in Douglasville” Bill replied, “but I was on my way to East River.”

“That won’t make it all the way to East River” the service manager said as he lifted the tire out of the trunk. “It’ll get you home, but you ain’t supposed to run these more than a hundred miles.”

“Any tire stores around here?” Bill asked.

The service manager shook his head. “Especially not tonight” he added.

Bill pulled his phone out of his pocket and called Mary as the two men mounted the spare on his car. She didn’t seem particularly surprised when he told her he couldn’t

make it that night. He promised to come the day after Christmas, as soon as he could get a new tire, and she said they'd see him then. She did, however, wish him a Merry Christmas.

"Merry Christmas!" Bill replied. "Put Jason on the line so I can wish him a Merry Christmas." He listened to her footsteps as she carried the phone through the house. Then he heard the muffled sounds of a heated discussion as she talked to Jason, apparently with her hand over the mouthpiece. It sounded like Jason was playing a video game. He thought he heard Jason swear when she said Bill wanted to talk to him.

"He can't come to the phone right now." Mary said. "He's taking some sort of an online test. For school." For a moment Bill thought she was lying to spare his feelings. He was almost touched by the thought. Then he realized she was just trying to cover up Jason's behavior because she was embarrassed by it.

"That's OK" Bill replied. "I'll talk to him in a couple of days." They said good-bye and he put the phone back in his pocket. His car was finished now, and the mechanic was cleaning his tools. Bill walked back into the waiting area. The service manager was gently waking the kid to tell him they were closing. Then he stepped behind the counter and began adding up the bill for the car repairs.

It was snowing harder as Bill left the shop. He turned toward Douglasville and had just begun to accelerate when he noticed a hitchhiker by the side of the road. As he drove past, he realized it was the kid from the repair shop. Almost without thinking he stepped on the brake. He hadn't picked up a hitchhiker since college, but somehow the fact that he'd seen this kid before made him stop.

"Thanks, mister" the kid said as he climbed into the passenger seat. "Where you headed?"

"Douglasville" Bill answered.

"Hey! That's great!" the kid said. "I live just a couple of miles this side of Douglasville." He leaned the seat back and put his feet up on the dashboard. "Nice car" he said.

"Would you mind taking your feet off my dash?" Bill asked. The kid gave him a quick look like it was the most outrageous request he'd ever heard, but he put his feet back on the floor one at a time. Bill wiped the muddy footprints off his dash with a gloved hand. They drove on in silence for a few minutes. Then the kid spoke.

"You got a phone I could borrow to call my mom?"

Bill pulled his phone out of his pocket and handed it to the kid without a word.

“Hey, Mom! I’m coming home.” Bill could hear a cry of delight from the kid’s mother. “Yeah. . .I met this guy from Douglasville and he’s giving me a ride. . . I’ll be there in about an hour. . .Love you too, Mom.” The kid handed the phone back. “Thanks” he said.

They drove on in silence while Bill tried to think of something to talk about. The kid just stared out the window. Finally Bill spoke. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“Matt” the kid answered, still staring out the window.

“Well, Matt. What brought you to Fulton?”

“A job” Matt answered. He leaned back in the seat and stared at the sun visor, as though resigning himself to the necessity of talking. “I know this guy who was selling Christmas trees. I helped him move trees around and tie them on top of cars. He let me stay in a trailer on the tree lot to keep people from stealing trees at night. We closed up this afternoon, though. No more trees ‘till next year.”

“Not many cars on the road tonight. What would you have done if I hadn’t picked you up?”

Matt just shrugged.

“Is there a shelter in Fulton?” Bill asked.

“You ever been to a shelter?” Matt asked.

“Can’t honestly say that I have.” Bill replied.

“Then maybe you ought to just shut up about things you know nothing about.” Matt said.

For a moment, Bill was too shocked to say anything. His first instinct was to stop the car and make the kid walk the rest of the way. Then he thought about giving him a lecture on manners, gratitude, and taking the rank off his field jacket. In the end he just clenched his teeth and drove on in silence, vowing to never again pick up a hitchhiker. A few miles on Matt broke the silence.

“I’m sorry” he said softly.

“Excuse me?” Bill wasn’t certain he’d heard correctly.

“I’m sorry I told you to shut up.” Matt spoke up a little, and with more conviction. “You were being really nice to me, giving me a ride and all, and I jumped down your throat because you asked a question. That was wrong.”

Bill was surprised at how much better the apology made him feel. “That’s OK” he said. “Apology accepted. It takes a big man to admit a mistake.”

“That’s what Bob used to say” Matt answered.

“Who’s Bob?”

“He’s a guy my mom married.” Bill waited to see if Matt was going to say more, but Matt seemed content to let the statement stand on its own.”

“Is that Bob’s field jacket?” Bill asked.

“No, this was my dad’s jacket.” Again Bill waited to see if there was more to the story, but Matt didn’t elaborate.

“I used to be in the Air Force” Bill said. “What did your dad do when he was in?”

“He died.” Matt said this without emotion. Just stating a fact.

“Oh. I’m sorry.” Bill was at a loss for words.

“It wasn’t your fault” Matt said. “And I’m not trying to be a smart ass about this. I just don’t know much about what my dad did. He died when I was two years old, and Mom used to get all weepy when I’d ask her about him so I stopped asking. I think he was on the bomb squad or something.”

“EOD? Explosive Ordnance Disposal? That’s a tough job.” Bill said appreciatively.

“Yeah. That sounds like it. He was trying to defuse some sort of a car bomb in Iraq, but he tried to speed things up when he heard there were kids headed his way. I guess they snuck around the roadblock or something. Anyway, that’s when it blew up.”

Bill sat in silence while he took this in. Then he spoke. “Your dad was a real hero, Matt.”

“That’s what they tell me.”

They drove in silence while Bill struggled to find something to say. He wanted to find a cheerier topic. “So, are your mom and Bob going to be happy to see you?” he asked.

Matt shook his head. “Bob doesn’t live with us anymore. He only stayed a couple of years. He seemed like a nice guy, I mean, we did Cub Scouts together and things like that. But then he ran off with a younger woman. Turned out this wasn’t the first time he’d done that. We later found out he was already married to two other women when my mom met him.” He said this in a matter-of-fact tone, like it was something that happened every day. Bill realized there was another world out there. One he knew nothing about.

“Do you like hockey?” Bill asked after they’d driven a few more miles. He was desperate to find some common ground with this kid.

“Never watch it.” Matt said flatly.

Bill gave up trying to make conversation. He felt sorry for the kid, but there was nothing he could do for him. He could understand why Matt didn’t seem interested in talking to an older man. He’d just leave the kid alone with his thoughts until they got to Douglasville.

After a while, Matt spoke up. “I do like baseball” he said.

“Oh?” said Bill, surprised that Matt had initiated a conversation. “What’s your favorite team?”

“Philadelphia” Matt replied.

“The Phillies?” Bill asked in mock horror. “Why do you like the Phillies?”

“They’re a good team” Matt answered. “They’ve got a lot of talented players and they win a lot. What’s not to like about the Phillies?”

“I don’t know. I think it’s the fans I dislike more than the Phillies themselves. The fans just seem nasty. They boo the players. Did you know they once booed Santa Claus?”

“I’m rooting for the team, not the fans” said Matt. “What team do you root for?”

“The Atlanta Braves” Bill announced proudly.

“Atlanta?! They’re lame.” Matt said.

“They’re not lame! They won 14 Divisional Titles in a row! No other team has *ever* done that, not even in another sport.”

“Yeah, and when was that? A million years ago? And how many World Series did they win?” Matt asked.

“Well, one.” Bill answered weakly. “They went to the Series three times, and they won once. Most years they were pretty beat up from winning the Division Title.” It sounded lame, even as he said it.

“They choked.” Matt declared.

“Well at least their mascot doesn’t look like a giant green booger!” Bill countered.

Matt laughed at that comment. They spent the rest of the drive talking about baseball, football, fishing, and television. It was snowing harder now, and the roads were getting treacherous. When Matt directed Bill onto a secondary road that led to his house, Bill was dismayed to see it hadn't been plowed yet. He nearly got stuck a couple of times. That damn miniature spare tire got no traction at all in the snow. Matt had to get out and push when it spun helplessly in the snow, but eventually they made it into his driveway.

Matt's mother ran out to hug Matt as they got out of the car. She insisted Bill come inside to warm up with some soup. They sat around the kitchen table and talked for much longer than Bill had expected. When he got up to leave, Matt stared out the window. "You're not going anywhere tonight" he announced.

Bill looked out the window and saw with dismay that it was now snowing much harder. The wind had also picked up, and was piling the snow in deep drifts across the road. It had taken several pushes from Matt to get the car to the driveway. There was very little chance he could make it back to the highway through the new snow, with or without Matt's help.

"You can spend the night on our couch" Matt's mother Laura suggested. Reluctantly Bill agreed. He already had an overnight bag in the car, as he'd been planning on spending the night with his wife and son. Laura soon had the couch fixed up with sheets and a warm blanket. The house was small, but it was clean and warm. The furniture in the living room reminded him of the things he and Mary had bought at a second hand shop when they were first married. A Christmas tree bathed the room in a soft, colorful light. Bill guessed it was one Matt had brought home from his job. There were a handful of presents underneath it. As Bill was about to drift off to sleep he remembered he had presents in the car for Mary and Jason. Presents he wouldn't be able to deliver on Christmas, and would have time to replace before he needed them. He tiptoed out to the car and brought them in. He then tore scraps of excess wrapping paper off the ends to make tags for Matt and Laura.

The next morning Matt bounced excitedly around the room, like a kid on Christmas. Cleaned up, he looked closer to 15 than 20. He and Laura both protested "You shouldn't have" when they found their presents from "Santa," but Matt was thrilled with the video game and Laura seemed pleased with her new bathrobe.

"There's one present left" Matt announced as he looked under the tree. He picked up a shapeless mass of wrapping paper loosely tied with a ribbon. "This one's addressed to you" he said as he handed it to Bill. Bill unwrapped the paper and found a nearly new Philadelphia Phillies baseball cap.

"Sorry I didn't have anything for the Braves" Matt said.

"That's fine" Bill said while trying the hat on for size. "I already have a Braves hat, but for some reason I don't have anything from the Phillies."

Laura roasted a chicken for Christmas dinner. She obviously hadn't planned on serving three people, but she made extra stuffing in a baking dish and made a huge bowl of mashed potatoes. The oven kept the kitchen warm and cozy, and Matt made a centerpiece out of a few ornaments and some evergreen clippings from the bottom of the tree. They sat around the kitchen table and had an excellent meal. The county snowplow came by and cleared the street while they were eating. After dinner Jason went outside to shovel the driveway while Bill helped Laura with the dishes.

Bill carried his overnight case out to the car just as Jason was putting the snow shovel away. There was a car covered with a tarp in the garage, and enough of the rear bumper was showing for Bill to identify it. "You've got an MGB!" he said in surprise.

"That was Dad's car." Matt replied. "It's a 1965 model."

"Does it run?" Bill asked.

Matt shook his head. "Can't get it to start" he said. "Bob said it had a blown head gasket."

"That's not too hard to fix" Bill replied. "If it is a head gasket. That shouldn't keep it from starting, though. Might just be a problem with the ignition. That's usually the weak point with B's. When's the last time you tried to start it?"

"A buddy and I tried to jump start it last summer." Matt said. "We cranked it for a long time but it didn't even cough."

"At least it cranked. That means the motor's not froze up. I used to have an MGB. They're pretty easy to work on. If you're interested, I could try to help you get this one going."

"That would be great!" Jason shouted.

"I've got to get a new tire for this car and then go see my wife and son. I get a few days off next week, around New Year's Day. Would you like to work on it then?"

Jason nodded enthusiastically. "My job ended, and school doesn't start 'till after New Year's. Next week would be fine."

Bill said his good-bye's and drove off in an excellent mood. He was half-way home before he realized why he was so happy. He felt like he was getting a second chance to be a father.