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## **Christmas in Battle Ground**

by Eric Jon Miller

Christmas in Battle Ground

For Josh. You had better like it.

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## **1. Stress and Cigarettes**

Twenty miles northwest of the exit for Battle Ground, Indiana, on a stretch between square plots of dormant cornfields, a semi laid overturned on the snow swept pavement of I-65, completely covering the shoulder and blocking the right-hand lane. Two compact coupes were crashed into the underside of the trailer, looking something like car pups suckling at their mother. The doors of all three vehicles were open, abandoned to the snow and the inky dark that came Christmas

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in Battle Ground so early this time of year. It was Christmas Day.

Dozens of wind turbines peppered the surrounding fields, each flashing Christmas in Battle Ground a single red warning beacon in perfect concert with its neighbors. It was the only light save a pair of high-beams that illuminated the wreckage. Wyatt Leone was driving his Prius cautiously around the scene using the only open lane, and his girlfriend, Staci, was seated in the passenger seat dialing 911 into empty air waves. They were doing what comes naturally to most people who encounter a horrific accident along the road: rubbernecking.

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"I have zero bars, and the battery is about gone," Staci said, dropping her cell phone into the drink Christmas in Battle Ground holder next to her seat. She unconsciously chewed at a long pink fingernail. "Do you think we should stop?"

"I don't know, it looks like the cars have been here for awhile. I don't see anybody," Wyatt said. He was leaning over far into the passenger's seat to peer out the window. "Look at the layer of snow on them. These must have been here half the day, at least. I can't believe they haven't been towed off the road yet."

"This is making me so nervous," Staci said. She had, in truth, seemed nervous since Wyatt first picked her up from her place in the southern suburbs of Christmas in Battle Ground Chicago. The stress from the current car wreck, and the four others they had passed on the way down, had only built on a pre-existing foundation. "We're already late. This is going to make an awful first impression," she said.

"I think we'll be fine," Wyatt said. "But you're right. Let's just make it to Battle Ground and call the police once we get there."

Wyatt maneuvered his Prius around the busted semi, then past the darkness of a dozen more farm fields, and exited the highway. They drove through occasional snow drifts and snaking side Christmas in Battle Ground roads, following the railroad tracks toward the edge of town. On their way they passed a collection of trailer homes and century-old houses that sat next to each other as odd, and yet comfortable, neighbors. The conversation for the rest of the Christmas in Battle Ground trip was stilted, a general unease growing independently inside each occupant of the Prius as it approached Wyatt's childhood home.

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The house had two floors above street level, and a driveway that wrapped downhill behind the home to a basement-level garage. The driveway was lit with candles nestled in paper bags, creating a munchkin-sized landing strip for Wyatt to park his hybrid Christmas in Battle Ground on. He stopped near the top of the hill, and as he put the car in park, Staci squeezed his hand.

"Okay, just so I have it straight," Staci said. "Annette, John, and Morgan. Your mom is a craftwork photographer and makes ceramics on the side, your dad is a truck driver who loves Westerns and trick shooting..."

"You have no idea," Wyatt muttered.

"...and Morgan is your sister, *not* your brother, and she's in Engineering at Purdue."

"It's Agricultural and Biological Engineering, not quite the same. It's kind of like, advanced farming."

"Oh? Okay, got it. What was your brother's name again?"

"Virgil," Wyatt said.

"And Virgil does...? You never really told me."

"Virgil scares small children and bashes heads for a living."

"Wyie, honey, I'm serious."

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Wyatt sighed. "Virgil's a bouncer."

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"You seem really annoyed. Are Christmas in Battle Ground Christmas in Battle Ground you annoyed at me? Did I do something?"

"No, honey, I'm not annoyed. Really, I'm not. I appreciate you coming along."

Staci looked at him with a tinge of doubt. She leaned over and kissed him Christmas in Battle Ground on the cheek, then opened the car door. Wyatt went around back and opened the hatch to fish out a neck-high stack of presents. Three of the presents in the pile were his idea, all the smallest boxes. The From Christmas in Battle Ground tag of one Christmas in Battle Ground of the gifts stuck to his sweater as he pulled them out.

"I really hope your family likes what I got them," Staci said, shouting behind herself. She was already walking up the driveway to the front door, crunching salt beneath pointed heels. She stopped and swung around as Wyatt caught up to her. "You still want me here, right? You're sure about this?"

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"Absolutely, honey. My family will be crazy for you, I swear," Wyatt said.

Staci seemed to pick up on Christmas in Battle Ground the hesitation in her boyfriend's voice, but then Christmas in Battle Ground moved on without comment. "Okay, how do I look? I'm not too wrinkled from the car ride or anything?"

Despite the stack of presents in his arms, Wyatt played along, mimicking the critical eye of a fashion designer. He suspected anything Christmas in Battle Ground less would invite more questions. Staci's rose-pink blouse shone through the open front of her fur-lined puff jacket like a beacon, hugging her torso tightly. Her pencil skirt afforded even less slack, showing fewer wrinkles than Christmas in Battle Ground a military bunk ready Christmas in Battle Ground for inspection. Hair and makeup accentuated her green eyes and slim jawline well, but were a shallow breath away from being overdone. Wyatt momentarily feared his family would think he

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met her through an escort service, but he squelched the thought with a flood of greater concerns.

"Stunning," he said, inflecting his voice with mellow admiration.

"Really?"

"I'm speechless."

Staci smiled, took a deep breath, then rang the doorbell. Wyatt's paisley-and-pearl-clad mother answered the door. Her tightly curled hair looked like it had recently been dyed flaming red.

Staci pealed an upper-octave "Hi!" and gave the woman a gigantic hug.

"You must be Staci! I'm Annette. It's so nice to finally meet you. Oh, Wyatt, look at all those boxes."

"Hi, Ma. This is the lovely woman I told you about. The presents are no big deal."

"Oh nonsense," Annette said, her voice the sugary tone of a doting mother. She turned to face the living room and cupped her hands to the sides of her mouth. "VIRGIL!"

"What?" Virgil whined from inside.

"Get up and Christmas in Battle Ground help your brother!"

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Wyatt was kicking off his shoes as he heard the heavy clomp of Virgil's steps, and soon all seven feet, three-hundred pounds of his brother's huge balding mass was standing before him. Virgil looked damp at the forehead, and his skin had the color of plain toothpaste. He also looked much heavier than Wyatt remembered, not all of it fat.

"Hey," Virgil said Christmas in Battle Ground to Staci, as he snatched the tower of presents from Wyatt. Virgil walked away without so much as acknowledging his sibling, each step a low-Richter quake that rattled glass deep within the home.

"Nice to see you too, Brother," Wyatt sneered. "You feeling okay?"

"I think Virgil has that swine or bird or whatever animal flu," Annette said, glowering at her enormous son. "He got into a fight with a dirty, dirty man at his job, and you know how those homeless people carry disease. He absolutely refuses to see a doctor. He won't even take the pills I give him."

Staci glanced at Wyatt with a thinly disguised expression of dread. The news had referred to this latest flu as a potential pandemic. She had been religiously wearing surgical masks at her job as a dental hygienist, whether she was next to a patient or not, in order to not to catch the bug.

"It's not the flu!" Virgil yelled from the living room as he plopped the stack of gifts in front of the Christmas tree. "I've just been working late at the bar and they don't give me insurance. The Christmas in Battle Ground drunk asses I toss out every night have nothing to do with it. And penicillin doesn't work on viruses, God."

## **Christmas In Battle Ground**

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