

The Truthmobile

by Maryanne Stahl

It's the week before Christmas and she's had it. She's sick of everything: not having enough money, not having enough sex, not having enough sleep. She doesn't read as much as she used to. And every hurt feeling seems rerouted from its source to some mysterious place that erupts in a conflagration. She hates that, too.

That's why she has decided to just *do* the damned truthmobile, for once and for all. She's been talking about it for years, hasn't she? Okay, well, she's been thinking about it. Her sister would remember her saying so.

"Who's with me?" she says to her old grey cat, her youngish white cat and her wicked brown puppy. The wicked puppy wags its tail, paws the ground and jumps. The cats play their cards close. "Okay, then," she says.

She's had a magnetic sign made for the side of her Honda, **TRUTHMOBILE**, simple and elegant. Maybe too simple; she's worried it suggests a religious affiliation. She tethers the puppy to the back seat, next to the half-open window, where it can fly its ears. The cats, one a Zen Buddhist, the other a nihilist, decline the excursion. They prefer to guard the homestead --from the strategic vantage point of the down comforter on her bed.

So she takes off in the Honda with the puppy in the back and a sprig of mistletoe stuck in the visor. She drives and wonders: why is truth so elusive? Is it her? Was Einstein ontologically happier than she? (She doubts it. But what does that prove?)

She takes a back road, narrow and tree-covered. She passes an owl, a real owl, sitting on a fence post, and considers it a sign. She lowers her window all the way. The puppy sniffs the air like a gourmand.

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She enters the outskirts of the city, stops at a red light. A small band of mocha-skinned children gaze skeptically at her. One of them pokes the other in the ribs. The poke-e, a frowning but angel-faced boy strolls over to her window. "Do you buy truth or sell it?" he asks.

She hadn't considered either. "Gather it," she wants to say except she knows that's a lie. She shrugs. The puppy whimpers and twists at its tether.

"Can I pet your dog?" the boy asks.

"Sure," she says, staring at the light, awaiting the change. The boy opens the passenger door and reaches in to where the puppy squeals and licks at his fingers.

The light turns green. She taps the boy's shoulder. "Take it," she says.

The boy's arms are around the puppy's middle. His ears are wet and red from being nibbled. "The dog? For real?"

"Uh huh."

The boy unhooks the tether from the headrest and the puppy jumps out of the Honda. Someone behind them honks a horn.

"Thanks!" the boy calls as the Truthmobile drives on.

