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**SNOW DAY**

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SNOW DAY

By

Raphael DiDomenico

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

2007

UMI Number: 1449718



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## ABSTRACT

## SNOW DAY

By

Raphael DiDomenico

People do not live their lives completely independently of one another. Despite most people's best attempts to reserve their private lives and remain objective and detached when dealing with others, every one is linked in some way to others. This story looks at the ways unrelated events in virtually unacquainted peoples' lives affect others and initiate resolutions for all involved.

Three individuals are brought together by fate, chance, and even inclement weather, and are forced to evaluate their lives and make changes that improve each of their lives.

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2007

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Sophie for her unending support—and to  
Nealy, too.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This author would like to thank his thesis director, Ron Johnson; and thesis reader, John Smolens for their support, direction, and patience during the creation and completion of this project.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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## INTRODUCTION

People do not live their lives completely independently of one another. Despite most people's best attempts to reserve their private lives and remain objective and detached when dealing with others, every one is linked in some way to others. This story looks at the ways unrelated events in virtually unacquainted peoples' lives affect others and may initiate resolutions for all involved.

This story is largely set in Marquette, Michigan where the weather is constantly a factor in everyday life for the city's residents. Just like, as a child, snow days brought me out of the structure and predictability of a day in the classroom, the snow day in this story brings the characters out of their familiar routines and both forces and allows them to reevaluate their situations.

## PART ONE

Tom woke up slick with cold sweat. The dreams were getting worse. Everyone had said he'd start feeling better, but it hadn't happened yet. He swung his feet out of bed, and shuffled into the kitchen. The sun was high in the sky, and its reflections off the snow outside was blinding. It must have been after noon. Tom hadn't seen a morning in weeks. He scooped grounds into a filter and filled the coffee maker's reservoir with water. Digging through clutter around the sink, he found a book of matches and a pack of Camels, lit one, and leaned back against the counter. Exhaling slowly, he watched the cloud of smoke spread out and linger. He was pretty sure he'd been asleep more than awake since the accident, and really didn't know how long it had been, but judging by the ripeness of the funerary gifts of Jell-O moulds and macaroni salads in the fridge, it must have been some time. The coffee machine gurgled and sputtered, and a dog-shit smell of coffee filled the room. Everything smelled foul to him lately. The sun was too bright—people too loud.

The coffee in the pot was about half-full, so Tom stuffed his cigarette into the corner of his mouth and began searching the counter for a mug. Grabbing one and dumping the contents in the sink, he filled it from the pot while coffee poured down onto the warming base. With the carafe back under the stream, on top of a boiling puddle, he walked

out of the kitchen, leaving a smog of steam and smoke behind. In the living room, he dropped onto the couch and clicked the TV on. He flipped through the channels, passing soap operas, before pausing on *ElimaDate*.

The phone rang. Tom ignored it. The answering machine was full and not taking anymore calls, so the ringing continued for at least a minute. Finally, he leaned over and picked up the receiver from its cradle.

"Hello."

"Hi Tom, it's Bill."

"Yeah."

"Yeah, I was just wondering how you were doing. Did you get any of my messages?"

"Ahh, no. I haven't really checked in a while."

"Oh. Well, how are you doing?"

"Alright, I suppose." There was a wispy net of spider web in the corner above the television; Tom thought about sweeping it down—tomorrow.

"That's good. Good to hear. I was also wondering if—no hurry—if you knew when you might want to come back to work? There's no hurry, but I wanted to know if I should get somebody to fill in—for awhile. I mean, it'd be good to get you back, and you always can come back. I

just need someone soon. So I just wanted to know."

"Is Monday alright?"

"Monday—that's tomorrow, you know—would be fine—great. As long as it's still not too soon."

"No, I can do Monday."

"Did you get a new—I mean can you find a way to get in?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Great. We'll see you tomorrow."

Tom hung up without a "goodbye" and watched the girls on TV bicker and belch bleeped insults at each other for a minute before he turned the volume down, laid his head back and closed his eyes.

He dreamed of her again. He always dreamed of Laura now. They were walking in Presque Isle Park, a rocky, forested thumb of land that jutted out into Lake Superior on the north end of town. It was sunny. They were laughing, walking hand-in-hand. They strolled along a path at the edge of a cliff. To their right, the lake spread out to meet the horizon. Laura skipped ahead of Tom, and he let her stretch his arm forward until his fingers slipped from hers. She turned around and walked backwards smiling back at him. Tom saw her left foot slip—saw the ground crumble. His mouth dropped open in horror as Laura's eyes widened. In an instant she was gone over the side. Tom heard her scream become quieter until it was gone. In his sleep, Tom had seen her die hundreds of

times in every way his brain could seem to think up, but there was always the scream, and him watching dumbly.

When Tom woke up again, a crappy pseudo-court show was on television. Tom shut it off and carried his coffee mug back into the kitchen to give it a warm-up shot from the pot. For the first time in—he couldn't remember when—he felt like eating. He poked around in the refrigerator, opening Tupperware and lifting aluminum foil, but found white forests of mold, green, oozing sores, and crumbling cheese-like masses. Everything in the cold, dark tomb had begun to decompose. Tom's appetite, too, expired, and he shut the door leaving the contents to nature.

Digging another cigarette from his pack, the last of the carton, he noticed he'd have to leave the apartment again soon. With the Camel dangling from his lips, he went into the bedroom. He never used to smoke in the bedroom. He sat down on the edge of the bed, a tangle of sheets and blankets, and picked up a shoe box from the floor. Letters and photographs were stacked in neat piles inside. The first picture was of them sitting at a table covered with beer cans and red plastic cups. Laura's head rests on his shoulder as the two of them raise their glasses up to the camera—broad, half-drunk smiles. He straightened the photo back on top of the pile and set the box back down. The ash on his cigarette had grown to over an inch and drooped down like a crooked

finger. He pulled it from his mouth, tapped powder to the floor, took two more quick drags, and dropped the butt into his mug. He clicked on the TV in the bedroom and, though already barely audible, turned the volume lower. Tom set the mug on the television and drew the duvet, sheets and pillows around him like a cocoon.

The phone began to ring again.



## PART TWO

“Frank, I need to talk to you about something,” a tall, dark-haired, brown-eyed man spoke into his mobile phone. He stood with his coat on watching the snow fall outside of the emergency entrance of Marquette General Hospital where he worked. “No, it’s a—it’s kind of important. You get off soon, right? Well, you’re not going to make it home for a while anyway, so meet me down at Remie’s in an hour. No, they’re open. You think I don’t know my bars? Alright, see you in a bit.”

John snapped the phone shut, stuffed it into the side of his down jacket and zipped the pocket shut. Beyond the canopy over the doors, snow covered the parking lot and cars like a thick white sheet. He took a step forward and the doors slid open, letting a burst of cold air and a few fluffy snowflakes hit him in the face. “First day of spring my ass—only in the U.P.,” he muttered, trudging outside.

In the parking lot, he reached out to one of the snow heaps and pulled a door open from the side. He dug a key ring from his pocket, leaned into the car and started it. From the back seat he produced a long-handled brush and worked around the car, pulling snow away until he had unearthed a silver Nissan Ultima.

\* \* \*

Sometime before dawn, Kathleen’s nose woke her up. It felt like someone had an ice cube held against it. Her old farmhouse in the

woods southeast of Marquette was heated by a wood furnace in the basement. It must have burned itself out or at least been very close to doing so. Her husband always made sure it was stocked after his night-shift at the state prison. She threw an arm against the mattress next to her—empty.

“Probably found himself some slut to go home with,” she muttered aloud. “At least he’s warm then.” She rolled over and drew the blankets tight around her face. When he got home she’d make sure he was sorry. She’d send him crawling back to mommy. That’d make everyone happy.

Outside the wind shrieked, and the house swayed and shuddered as a lake-effect snowstorm buried Upper Michigan.

\* \* \*

Monday morning for Tom started with an alarm clock’s bleating. He lay in bed listening to it for several minutes before rising up and heading into the kitchen where he dumped the last of the coffee grounds directly from the can into the filter. Digging through an ashtray on the table, he and found a butt with enough tobacco left for a few stale drags, then filled his mug with the first drips from the coffee machine and replaced it with the carafe. Sipping from his mug, he stared out the window as the sun, vague and hazy, began to peek over rooftops down the street. Thick, fat snowflakes fell on the street, the cars, the buildings.

He heard the screen door squeak and then knocking on the door. Tom continued to sip his coffee. After the third set of knocks he got up and turned the deadbolt. Tom sat back down as the doorknob turned and the door burst open.

“Hey, look who’s up. Do you have any milk?” John pushed the door shut against the wind holding it open and crossed the kitchen to the refrigerator. He held a gas station cup and the refrigerator door handle in one hand, braced himself with the other and leaned into the fridge. “Whoa. Now that is nasty. If there is any milk—I’m not even going to look—I’m not consuming anything that came from that sewage pit. And I thought this coffee was gross. What do you eat around here?”

Tom shrugged.

“How’s the neck—still bothering you? Here, I brought you something. Muscle relaxers. They should help get you through the day.”

“How is it out there?”

“Snowing, but it’s not that bad. You’ll make it there and you’ll be feeling better in no time.”

“Sure?”

“Sure.”

“I don’t know John. Maybe I’m not ready to—“

“Sure you are. You just need to get out of this house. Sitting around moping all day is not doing you any good.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Me? I can walk.” John glanced at the window. “Okay, I can call a taxi. But before then, I’m meeting Frank at Remie’s for a beer. You remember Frank don’t you?”

Tom shook his head.

“We ran into him last New Year’s. His wife is—anyway, I’ll let you finish getting ready. Here you go.” John dropped a set of keys and a tiny manila envelope onto the table. “Don’t worry about gas, I just filled it. Don’t take too many of those either. They’ll put you right out.”

John zipped his coat tight against his neck covering the top of his blue hospital scrubs, and disappeared back out the door. Tom set his steaming mug on the table and picked up the tiny yellow packet. Turning it around in his hand, he watched snow gather on the window sill, slowly blocking out the world.

\* \* \*

In the morning, Kathleen was still alone. She tossed the comforter from her shoulders, *asshole didn’t even bother to come home*, and tested the floor with her toes before planting her feet on the pine planks. “And this house is freezing.”

She bundled into a pink terrycloth bathrobe and stepped into dingy white slippers. In the basement, Kathleen opened the door of the wood furnace to find a small bed of dull, red coals. “Just great. We

could have all frozen to death.”

She crumpled newspaper into balls and mounded them with on top of the coals. Flames popped onto the paper and began to devour it. The edges of the kindling darkened and sprouted orange tendrils. The pile slowly collapsed in on itself. Kathleen picked a few larger pieces of wood and laid them on top. She shut the door, latched it, and went back upstairs.

She dumped several tablespoons of grounds into a Mr. Coffee filter basket and filled the machine with water, but paused when she caught a glimpse out a window. Angry heat burned her cheeks. She watched snow swirl over the caps of rolling, frozen waves of white drifts. Wispy eddies danced around the roof of her car, buried half-past the windows.

“Fucking asshole.” She slammed the carafe onto the hotplate and stomped up the stairs. The kids were still sleeping. A song played softly on a radio next to the oldest, Matt’s, bed. The song ended and the deejay began to read off a list of school closings. The kids had no doubt heard the same list earlier. Their school was on the list. She crossed Matt’s room in a few quick steps and shook him awake. “Get up. We have to clean the driveway so I can get to work.” She turned off his radio and headed back downstairs.

She forced her feet into a pair of Sorrels, shoved her hands into gloves, stretched a hat over her head, stormed outside, and began to toss

snow off the porch. Kathleen worked her way to the walk and began to clear a path to her car. With every pitch of the shovel, she cursed her husband's name, sometimes under her breath, sometimes in her head, but either way, it became a sort of cadence: *fuck-ing Frank. In-con-sid-er-ate Ass-hole.* A yard into the drift between her and the Dodge Dynasty, she stopped and threw the shovel aside, stormed back up the porch and ripped the door open. "Get your ass out here before I kick it," she bellowed up the stairs. Clumps of snow fell from all the south-facing windowsills when she slammed the door shut. Kathleen marched back down the walk and began to chop at the drift again.

Matt stumbled out onto the porch pulling on his cap and gloves. He grabbed an aluminum coal shovel, shuffled down the stairs and attacked the neck-high drift alongside his mother.

"Move, damn it. I get enough lazy shit from your father. You don't have to try to be like him."

They pitched scoop after scoop, making mountains that peaked and faltered, breaking into avalanches of fist-sized snowballs that would roll down onto the newly excavated pavement. Matt started to scrape the fallout off the walkway.

"Don't be stupid. Get the snowblower and blow the driveway— idiot. Just like your father. I'm going to be late."

Kathleen looked out over all the snow they still needed to move. At

the end of the walk was the driveway, a large parking area that narrowed into a thirty-yard stretch to the road, which then ran another quarter-mile up to the highway. Kathleen lived in a town that defined rural—one gas station, one store, no traffic lights. Out here, people measured distance in the time it took to drive. She lived about fifty minutes from Marquette, Michigan.

Guttural protests of the snowblower broke their rhythm and rose into an even growl. Matt wrestled the machine out of the garage and down towards the road. Kathleen dug a trench around her car, climbed inside and cranked the engine until it caught. She stood half-in/half-outside the car door and watched her son plow the hunter-orange Ariens through drifts taller than he was.

Kathleen had no idea where her husband was, but he was supposed to have had all of this done already. She slammed the door shut, grabbed the shovel, carried it up to the porch where she thrust it into a bank, causing another avalanche, and stormed back into the house. Her boots left slushy puddles across the kitchen. “I guess he’ll have to clean the floor again,” she mocked while kicking a clump of snow against the wall. She grabbed a fresh mug from the cupboard and filled it from the coffee pot. “He can wash the dishes again too.”

“Mommy, I’m cold.”

Kathleen turned around to see her youngest daughter, Amy,

coming down the stairs. She had her arms pulled inside her one-piece pajamas. The sleeves hung limp like a war casualty's.

“Get back in bed. It's warm under your blankets. And get your arms out of there before you fall.”

Kathleen tromped down to the basement and grabbed the furnace door's handle. It was still cold. Inside, the three logs she had added earlier sat smoldering. She built another heap of paper and kindling—bigger this time.

Kathleen stomped back up to the kitchen. Steam billowed from her coffee like smoke from a coal plant. She brought the mug to her mouth, but when she saw the clock on the wall, slammed it back down on the counter, and picked up the telephone. She dialed a number from memory. “John?” she asked into the telephone receiver. “Frank isn't here to blow the driveway. I'm not going to make it into work on time. Can you cover for me? I'll take your next weekend.”

She blew out a long puff of breath and looked up at the ceiling, tapping her foot. “I really can't make it. It's going to take me at least another hour to get out. No, I have no idea where he is. The asshole never even came home.”

Kathleen stopped tapping her foot and stared down at it instead.

“No, I haven't told him. He doesn't know. It has nothing to do with that. Look, I will, but can you just cover for me? Okay, thank you.”



She hung the receiver in its cradle, but continued to hold on to it, still staring at her foot.

\* \* \*

“That was her,” John said as he flipped his phone shut and dropped it into his coat pocket.

He sat in a narrow tavern, staring into the mirror behind the rows of liquor bottles. The inside of the tavern was like a wood-paneled cave. Water running in the sink at the center of the bar and a television at the far end were the only sounds. The only light was what managed to filter in from the dim, tinted windows. Marquette grew up as an iron-mining town. A few bars, whose owners don’t mind a roomful of dirt, dust, and grime, still opened early to cater to miners getting off work in the morning from the night-shift. Remie’s was one of those bars. A low roar grew louder and the bar glasses began to shake. Out of the corner of his eye John saw the orange light of a large snowplow strobe past the window.

A man on the bar stool next to John took a sip from a mug of pale beer. “What does she want?”

“She wants me to work for her today.”

“Are you going to?”

“No—fuck her—I think she deserves to be written up.”

“She deserves more than that.” Frank took another sip from his

beer. He was shorter than John, but stockier. As far as John knew, his only form of recreation was exercising. This was probably his first time in a bar since last January when Kathleen got a little too friendly and Frank had to take her home. He was the only person John knew who owned two models of Bowflexes and actually used them. “Does she know I know?”

“No, and she doesn’t know you’re with me either.”

“Good, we’ll just keep it that way for now.”

“You’re better off without her.”

“We’ll see.”

“What are you going to do, Frank?”

“I think I’ll go down and stay with my mother for a while. After that, who knows? I think I’ll just take a little break from everything for a while—use some of that vacation and sick time.”

“I’d take this opportunity to improve your situation. Go somewhere warm—Florida perhaps. That’s what I’d do.” John paused to sip from his glass. “But seriously, you’ll be really lucky if The Bridge is open.”

“Mackinac? It might be in the four hours it’ll take me to get there. If not, I’ll find something to do in St. Ignace. And what are you going to do—sit here and drink?”

“Actually, yeah. It’s so shitty out I don’t feel like going anywhere.

Somehow it seems right to be sitting in a bar drinking while she gets into trouble for missing work. Anyway, I lent Tom my car.”

“How’s he doing?”

“Oh, he’ll be alright. He just needs to get out of that house—move on. He’s going into work today.”

“He’s going to try?”

“Yeah, try.”

Both men raised their glasses to their lips and glanced at the window. It was like looking into a shaken snow globe.

\* \* \*

The smell of smoke reached Kathleen’s nostrils and she looked towards the basement where thin gray clouds wafted up the stairs. Down the stairs she ran to find smoke blasting out from around the furnace door like a boiling teakettle. She turned the handle on the flue, opening the path to the chimney. The rolling clouds stopped. Then, she trudged back upstairs and out to the driveway where Matt and the snowblower fought like sumo wrestlers trying to push each other back—neither one seemed to be gaining any ground.

“Matt. Matt, go inside and fix breakfast for your sisters.”

Matt turned the key on the snowblower and let the engine wind down. “What?”

“Go inside and make breakfast.”

“Isn’t Dad going to be home?”

“I don’t know, but he’s not the only one that can cook eggs around here.”

Kathleen grabbed the handle of the starter cord and pulled. The snowblower grunted. She yanked faster. The machine coughed and wheezed. She stood up, weaved both fists around the handle, and began a frenzy of jerks that ended when the cord failed to catch and her arms snapped back. “Fuck.” She let the cord go and it wound back into the snowblower. She rubbed her right elbow and shook her arm, flexing the fingers, and kicked one of the tires. It bounced her foot back with a springy *plink*. Kathleen grabbed the handle again and twisted her whole body, wrapping the cord across her belly and chest. The engine came alive, and Kathleen squeezed the levers down—one on the left handle bar to start the auger, and one on the right to drive the wheels.

She fought for every inch of the driveway. The drifts were too tall and too dense, so she needed to keep stopping the snowblower’s forward crawl to let it digest the snow and catch up. Sometimes, the tires would just spin, and she had to wrench the whole machine from side to side to get them to grab again. Frank could finish the whole driveway in an hour. She didn’t know how he did it. She stopped partway through her second lap, shut the engine off, and walked back up to the house. Exhaust plumed from the tailpipe, and slush dripped from the windows

of her car. She rested against the car. Neither of them had a cellphone. They didn't work out here. She could only think of one place Frank could be. Kathleen went back to the house, stepped inside the door and out of her boots. Matt and Amy sat at the table eating.

"Where's Kellie?"

"She said it's too cold to get out of bed," Amy reported. "You have to make a fire."

"I did make a fire. It's not cold in here. Matt, will you go check the furnace?" Matt swung his legs out from under the kitchen table and headed towards the basement.

"Amy, go watch cartoons or something."

"I'm not done."

"Take it with you."

Kathleen picked up the phone from its cradle on the wall and dialed Marquette General's Emergency Room, where she worked. "Beth? Hi, this is Kathy. Good, except that I'm having trouble getting out. Look, Frank isn't home yet, and I was wondering—hoping—he isn't there is he? Alright, good. No, I'm sure he's fine. He probably stopped off somewhere." She wiped a lock of hair from her face and tucked it behind her ear. "I'm still trying to get out, but I asked John to cover for me. He said he would." She wrinkled her nose and let out a sigh. "Well I don't know where everyone is today. They're probably together for all I know."

Her eyes widened a little and she snapped her mouth shut. “I’ll be in as soon as I can. Alright, but I really didn’t think anything had happened to him anyway.”

\* \* \*

“Thanks, John, you’ve been great,” Frank said setting his mug down.

John spit a portion of the sip he was taking back into his whiskey glass. “Ha. We wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for me.”

“She still did it. You just told me about it.”

“Just doing what needed to be done. I always liked you better than her anyway. I swear everyone at work knows. It just didn’t seem right. As long as you don’t hold it against me.”

“Not at all. But I should be going before I’ve had too many of these.” Frank finished his beer and stood up. “It looks like they’re getting most of it cleared up out there.”

“Yeah, sure. Just wait a few minutes. You won’t be able to tell they plowed.”

Frank took out his wallet, thumbed through the bills, and dropped three dollars onto the bar. “Thank you,” he called to the bartender, who echoed it back to him. “Take it easy. I’ll see you later.”

“You take it easy; it’s hell out there.”

Frank walked to the door and as he pulled on his gloves and hat,

John tipped his glass to shake the last few drops into his mouth.

“Another?”

“Of course. Booze is the only thing that makes listening to other peoples’ problems bearable. Am I right?”

“You sure are.”

“I don’t know how you do it. You listen to it sober.”

The bartender just shrugged and traded a full glass of whiskey for John’s empty one. “Three seventy-five.”

John dug in his coat pocket and pulled out a fold of bills.

“You dropped some change.”

John surveyed the floor before counting out three bills. “They’re just pennies—useless. I usually just throw them out.”

“They add up though.”

“They’re not worth the metal they’re made of. Did you know that?”

“No I didn’t.” The young man wiped the spot where Frank’s beer mug had sweated onto the counter.

“Yeah, they’re always talking about fazing them out. Then, they really won’t be worth anything.”

“Maybe people will collect them. They may be worth more then.”

“Maybe. Maybe I’ll care about them then.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a few more coins. “Until then, here’s a few more for the floor.” He let the dull copper drop down with the others.

“You don’t have anyone waiting at home for you?”

“Me? No. I never wanted to be domesticated. Of course I didn’t want to be stuck here either. I wanted to travel, see the world, get a boat and sail around the Caribbean—something. But, being stuck here with kids and a wife, that seems boring—such a dull existence.”

“Your buddy doesn’t seem to mind it.”

John’s hand stopped halfway to his mouth with his whiskey glass. “Oh, really?” He gestured with the whiskey on every second word, slopping liquor onto the bar. “How *happy* is *he*?”

“Maybe you’re not the best judge of that.”

“I just call them as I see them.” He finished his whiskey, open-mouth exhaled, and set the glass down.

\* \* \*

Kathleen hung the phone back on the wall, opened a drawer and brought out a telephone directory. She flipped it open to the Ms and ran her finger along the “Michigan, State of” listings, stopping at the “State Police” entry. She took the telephone again, tapped the digits on the keypad, and pressed the receiver to her ear.

“Yes. I was wondering if you had any accidents early this morning. My husband hasn’t come home. Johnson, Frank. No? Are all the roads open? 28 isn’t—what about 94? Yes? Okay, thank you.”

Kathleen’s hand lingered on the phone in the cradle after she hung



it up. Matt startled her when he popped back into the kitchen.

“Mom, I think it’s going now.”

“Thank you, Matt. Would you go finish the driveway? Dad won’t be able to make it up.”

“Ahh, I hate that thing. If Dad wasn’t so cheap, we wouldn’t have such a crappy snowblower.”

“It’s the best one we could afford. Would you rather dig by hand?”

“No, but Grandma would have got us a better one.”

“We don’t need her help with everything. I’ll do it myself anyway. You just—just wash the breakfast dishes.”

Kathleen put her gloves and boots back on and plodded down to the Ariens.

\*\*\*

Through the window of Remie’s Tavern, John watched a grizzly figure step off a city bus. He was at least six feet tall—two-fifty—with a long, dirty, white beard and wore a heavy flannel jacket with a sticky nametag, the kind passed out at meetings and conferences, slapped on his chest. According to the label, his name was “Susan.” Susan pulled the plate glass door open and lumbered inside, slid a canvas book bag off his shoulder and dropped it on the floor, then took off his coat and draped it over a stool. He sat down and waited as the bartender ignored him and continued washing glasses. Finally the young man walked to

Susan's corner of the counter and stood over him, drying an ashtray.

"Coffee," he croaked out through cracked, dry lips past the thick, white beard.

The bartender stayed, studying him for a moment, but turned to pour a cup when Susan produced a large, pink pencil case from his bag and began to stack pennies into straight towers.

"Seventy-five." The young man set a steaming, over-cooked mug of thin coffee onto the counter, scooped up the large pile of change, dropped it into his tip jar, and walked to the other end bar to sit and watch a pool tournament on ESPN.

Susan's hands trembled as he raised the cup to his lips, and coffee sloshed over the rim and onto his scabby fingers. He wore a short-sleeved, button-down, canvas-colored shirt printed with daisies and eagle feathers. Just below the loose sleeve, on his scaly, mottled right arm, there was an indiscernible tattoo—a blue smear like a bruise.

As John strained to make out the artwork on Susan's arm, he reached into a filthy handbag and pulled out a pad of paper. Out of the same pink pencil case which held his change, he produced a blue and white Bic pen. Susan looked over at John and he saw the beard on Susan's face draw up into what he guessed was a smile underneath. Then, the big man began to write. While he wrote he chuckled to himself. John shook his head and poured the contents of his glass into

his mouth.

\* \* \*

Kathleen pushed the snowblower back into the garage and walked back up to the house. She went into the bathroom and turned the shower faucets. Water sputtered out and gained force until it flowed evenly. Kathleen tested the mix and turned the hot faucet a little to the left. She undressed, dropping her clothes in a heap on the floor, and picked a brush up from the counter. While straightening her hair, she watched her reflection in the mirror. Her cheekbones were high and well-defined. Her nose was small and the tip turned up slightly at the end, her lips full and pouty. She was an attractive woman, but she did nothing to stop condensation from blotting over her reflection.

After a quick shower, Kathleen rushed through her makeup routine and twisted her hair up on her head. She wrapped a towel around herself and ran upstairs to her bedroom where she grabbed a pair of cranberry-colored scrubs and threw them on. Back downstairs, she slipped her white work shoes on, tied them, and headed towards the front door. Matt and Amy were in the living room, sitting on the couch watching television.

“I’m leaving now. Have your dad call me when he gets home.”

“Alright,” Matt said.

“Bye Mommy,” Amy chirped.

Kathleen rushed out the door, slamming it louder than she expected. Snow had started piling on the driveway already. She opened the car door and felt the warm air blow across her hand and hit her face like heat from an oven. She slid onto the seat, closed the door and slid the shifter to reverse. The car backed up and turned, then paused before speeding down the driveway and up the road.

\* \* \*

A loud chortle came from the corner of the bar, and when John looked in that direction, he caught Susan's stare. John raised his hands to his sides and shrugged his shoulders. Susan laughed and went back to his writing. John shook his head again and looked away from Susan, to the television above the liquor selections. "Oh shit," he blurted. "Can you turn this up?" A news teaser ran through the afternoon's headlines. He pulled a cell phone from his coat pocket and dialed. "Hey man, it's John. Give me a call when you get this."

John felt Susan's gaze on him as he thumbed the keypad of his phone again and turned his back to Susan.

"Mary, did you see the news? Yeah, I thought so too; it's right where he would have been—better not be. Fuck. I tried—I just did. No, I got his voicemail right away. Call me back when you know something." He slapped the phone shut and slammed it onto the table. "Fuck." John turned to Susan. "What are you smiling at—crazy old fucker?"

Susan chuckled as he brought his coffee to his mouth.

“Must be nice to be fucking insane. Not a care in the world.”

Susan smiled.

“You all right man?” the bartender asked approaching John.

“Yeah—yeah, fine. I think I’m going to join him even. Cheers.

Give me another.”

\* \* \*

Kathleen drove as fast as she dared down Highway M-94, windshield wipers barely keeping the window clear. Visibility was no more than 50 yards, and that was just because of the conifers lining the road; when she passed a field, the wind blowing across the highway carried so much snow she couldn’t see the end of her car’s hood. While she was driving along one of these fields, the wind stopped and Kathleen thought she saw a headlight left of the road. A powerful blast of wind blew almost all the snowflakes from in front of her. In the ditch, with its nose wrapped around a tree, covered in snow, was a car.

Kathleen slowed down and stopped on the right shoulder, then turned on the hazard flashers and jumped out of her car. The car in the ditch was no longer running; there was just the one headlight, pointed at the ground and shaded with snow. Kathleen brushed the driver’s window clean and saw a man inside with his head slumped, chin resting on his chest. The door was locked and when Kathleen beat on the

window, she thought she saw his lips move, but wasn't sure. Running back up to her car, she opened the driver's door and pulled the trunk release lever. Kathleen slammed the door and ran around to the back where she found her emergency blanket and the tire iron. She took them back down to the ditch, threw the blanket on the roof of the car and took the tire iron in both hands. She swung it against the rear driver's-side window. It bounced. She tried again and again. Finally on the fourth swing, the window shattered and ran down the side of the car in a landslide of rectangular crystals. On its way down, the glass pulled snow off the door and revealed a silver body panel.

Kathleen reached forward between the driver's seat and door and pushed the lock button. All four of the doors whirred and clicked. She opened the driver's door and looked him over. The airbag was hanging from the steering wheel, lying in his lap. She couldn't see any blood, and his chest was rising and falling. She put her fingers to the side of his neck and felt his carotid artery pumping wildly. She pulled the blanket from the roof of the car and covered the man with it. She felt around the back of his neck, checking for any obvious protrusions. It felt alright. With both hands, she tilted his head back against the seat and held it there with her left hand while reclining the seat with her right.

The man began to mutter something.

"Can you tell me your name?" she asked.

“Laura,” he slurred.

“No, your name. What’s your name?”

“Laura.”

“Alright, do you know where you are?”

He opened his eyes and looked over at Kathleen.

“No, no, keep still.”

“Laura?”

“No, my name’s Kathy. We’ll get a hold of Laura for you. Can you tell me your name?”

“Tom.” He sounded drunk, but Kathleen didn’t smell anything alcoholic.

“Alright Tom, do you hurt anywhere.”

He tried to shake his head.

“Don’t move. Just keep still.”

“Do you know where you are?”

“In John’s car.”

“Good. Do you have a phone? You’ve had an accident. We need to call an ambulance.”

“No—no accident.”

“Yes, and we need to call an ambulance. Do you have a phone?”

“Pocket.”

She felt underneath the blanket and around his coat. On the right

side, there was a hard lump. She struggled with the pocket until she brought out a blue and silver Motorola. She looked at the signal indicator on the phone. They were closer to town so there were two bars on the phone—analogue. She dialed 911.

She heard an operator through the static.

“I’m at an accident on M-94 about five miles from 41. There’s one involved. He’s conscious, but not very lucid. No, I’m just a nurse. Just a blanket—I don’t have much to keep him warm. It’s getting bad out here. Yes, I understand. Alright, thank you.” She closed the phone and put it into her pocket, then leaned into the car. “Tom, an ambulance is on its way. It may take them awhile though. Can you keep talking with me?”

“Not an accident,” he whispered.

“No, no, you’ve hit a tree.”

“I did it on purpose.”

“What?”

“Pills. I took all of them.”

“What kind of pills?”

“John said I’d fall asleep.”

“Why would you want to do that, Tom?” She brushed hair out of his eyes.

“I killed her.”



“Who?”

“Laura.”

Kathleen stopped and pulled her hand away from his face.

“What?”

“I fell asleep and killed her.”

Kathleen looked over at the passenger’s seat. It was empty. There was no one in the back seat either. Besides the one she broke, the windows were all intact. “Tom, was there someone else in the car with you?”

“No. In my truck. I fell asleep. I heard her.”

“Tom, don’t worry about that now. It wasn’t your fault.”

“No, it was. No one knows. They don’t know.” His voice broke and wavered. “I heard her screaming. I killed her.”

“She wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself—would she?”

“I lost her. It’s my fault.”

Kathleen looked down at her boots in the snow. She kneeled and adjusted the blanket tighter around Tom’s neck. “We’ve all made mistakes. We can’t give up though—can we?”

“Give up what?”

“You love her, don’t you?”

Tom closed his eyes.

“She loves you—yes? I know she wouldn’t want you to hurt

yourself. We're gonna get you to the hospital and that's what she'd want."

"It's my fault," he whispered.

Kathleen leaned her shoulder against the door post and sat on her boots. Her legs melted the snow stuck to the soles and water soaked into her pants. Snow collected in her hair and clung to her eyelashes. "It is," she whispered.

\* \* \*

"What's his problem anyway?" John asked the bartender, gesturing with his rocks glass at Susan, scribbling in his notepad and chuckling at the end of the bar. He really looked like a derelict Santa, stroking his long white beard and watching John from the far corner. Though his beard was thin and scraggly, unlike any Hollywood, or even mall, Santa John had ever seen, something like merriment still twinkled in his eyes. His hunter-orange cap had no fuzzy white tassel, and instead of a fur coat he had that red flannel jacket covered, in different colors of ink, with—was it—yes, the name *Susan Hayworth*. He stared as if studying John, like any good Santa would, for a list maybe. Whether he watched the television set or concentrated on his glass, John could feel the man's sparkling blue gaze.

"I'm not sure. He comes in all the time though. I've heard a rumor that he used to be a professor, but his wife died and he ended up like

this.”

“His wife died, huh?”

“His daughter too.”

“Daughter too?” John leaned over the bar on his forearms.

“How?”

The bartender leaned back as a whiskey wind blew over him.

“Fire.”

“Wow, and he got messed up that bad?”

“I guess so,” the bartender said, turning to wipe dust of the bottles behind him.

“I’ve got a friend that killed his girlfriend—well, didn’t mean to— but he fell asleep driving and she died. Anyway, he’s not all messed up. I guess he’s been a little down.”

The bartender looked back at John over his shoulder.

“I mean he’s gonna be fine. When are they going to show the news again instead of this *Today Show* shit?”

“Don’t know,” the bartender said working his rag over the vodka section.

“He should have called by now.” John dumped his glass into his mouth and slammed it onto the counter as he stood up. “I’ve gotta go. I’ve gotta find my car.” He swung his coat over his back and headed for the door.

“I wouldn’t drive if I were you.”

“No, I just need to find it.”

As John neared the door, Susan thrust a sheet of college rule at him. His cheeks pulled up crowding his eyes and John could just make out his yellowed teeth through the hair over his mouth.

John snatched the page from Susan and continued out the door. Outside, a waist-high wall of snow separated the sidewalk from the road. He looked down at the paper. It was filled—lines and margins—with scrawled “Susan Hayworth”s. “Shit,” John said and folded the page, stuffing it into his coat pocket. He turned right and started walking up 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, up a hill heading into The Village, a compact neighborhood of houses and businesses on small lots crammed together with most of the houses and the upper floors of the shops converted into apartments for university students. At the north end of The Village, just before the university was the hospital.

John opened his phone and dialed. “Beth? Ah—no, I didn’t talk to her. No, I can’t come in. I’m—ah—I’m sort of drunk. I just worked all night, okay? This isn’t morning for me. This is my five o’clock. Listen, did you get a car accident in there this morning? A guy about my age—twenty-eight. Well, his name is Tom Becker.” John wiped snow from the back of his head and neck. “No? Alright, I just heard an accident was reported and I guess I got a little worried for a minute there. I’m actually

on my way down there. No, I'm not driving. I'm not coming in to work, Beth. I have to talk to Kathy. Yeah, I know she's not there yet. Look, I'll see you in a bit."

John clapped the phone shut, pulled on his gloves, and shoved his hands into his pockets. The wind seemed to blow right through his pants' thin material. Squinting against the snowflakes that clumped on his corneas, he tilted his face down and headed up the hill into the wind. The buildings on either side of the street were like shadows in a fog through the falling snow. It reminded John of a story he heard about old-timers using brooms held out car windows, feeling their way between snowbanks to get around. John stuck out his right hand and let his fingertips brush the brick building. He felt his glove snag and scrape its way over the rough wall. It allowed him to bury his face the rest of the way into his coat and keep his eyes pointed down at his feet. Watching each boot pass the other and crunch in the snow with a monotonous rhythm, John inched his way to the hospital.

\* \* \*

When Kathleen first heard the ambulance's wail, an inch or more of snow had collected on her coat. Her legs—doubled underneath—had fallen asleep, so she staggered a little as she stood, shaking clumps of powder loose from her shoulders. Squinting didn't help bring the ambulance into view. She waited, staring down the highway into the

static, for several minutes before a red light appeared. The light grew brighter and the siren louder as Kathleen made out more and more of the ambulance's shape. At first, the headlights, then the line of the roof and the windshield came into view, until the entire orange vehicle appeared as if coming out of a dense fog. Marquette General painted their ambulances a bright hunter orange for a reason.

The ambulance's siren cut out mid-wail as it pulled alongside Tom and Kathleen. Its deep-treaded tires crunched trails through the snow on the shoulder of the highway where it stopped a few feet off the road. With the big diesel engine still whirring, the doors opened and two men jumped out of the cab. One headed to the back of the ambulance, and the other started plodding through the snow towards Kathleen. His thick, heavy-looking boots disappeared with each step, the drifts came up to the knees of his snowpants.

"How is he?" the man called out as he neared.

"He was awake earlier," Kathleen yelled back. "I've just been trying to keep him warm."

The paramedic knelt down in the depression Kathleen had made in front of the driver's door. He leaned in with his tilted to the side like he was listening, pulled the blanket down off Tom's chest and slipped his hands into his jacket.

"I didn't find anything wrong, Greg." Kathleen offered.

The man looked up at her like she was a kid making noise in church, but said nothing—just continued to work around Tom’s head. Greg had a reputation among the nurses as an ass.

“He was talking to me earlier.”

“Did you get his name?”

“Tom.”

“Tom, can you hear me?” Greg had produced a penlight from his pocket and had Tom’s eyelids held open, shinning the light on and off of them.

“He said something about pills.”

“He took something?”

“I’m assuming.”

“Well, what was it?”

“I don’t know. He never told me.”

Kathleen heard rustling behind her and turned to see the other paramedic struggling through the snow with a black nylon bag. Each trip one of the three made down the ditch carved and packed down the snow to form a trail.

“Do you have the collar, Mark?”

Mark set the bag in the snow and dug out a white, foam and plastic cervical collar.

“Do you want to see if you can get in the back?” Greg asked as he

took the collar.

Mark opened the back door and crawled onto the seat. He reached over the front seat headrest grasped Tom's head. Together, the two men leaned Tom forward. Greg slid the collar behind Tom's neck and fastened the Velcro.

"Do you want me to get the board?" Mark asked, climbing out of the car.

"Yeah, go get the board," the first man grumbled. He pulled a polyester blanket out of the bag, tossed it on the ground and continued rifling through dropping items onto the blanket. He finally pulled out a blood pressure cuff and picked up a stethoscope from the blanket.

Mark started heading for the ambulance, paused in front of Kathleen, and waited for her to step aside into the deep snow. Kathleen heard him huff as he stomped up the path to the highway. She lifted her left foot. Snow was packed into the top of her shoes. She climbed back up onto the hard-pack and knocked her feet together.

"You don't have to stay. I think we can handle it," Greg told Kathleen as he strapped the cuff to Tom's arm and pumped air into the bladder.

"I was headed to work anyway. I thought I'd just..." She got out of Mark's way again as he carried a backboard under his arm. "...wait around to help."



“We got it,” Greg said pulling the earpieces of the stethoscope from his ear and letting it fall around his neck. “We’ll see you up there then?” he asked smiling while he ripped the Velcro pads of the blood pressure cuff apart, pulled it from Tom’s arm and threw it into the black bag.

Kathleen took a few steps backwards, watching as the two men lay the backboard on the ground in front of the car. She turned and started up the path. At the crest of the ditch, she looked back down as they—Mark on his legs and Greg at his shoulders—lifted Tom’s limp body from the car.

\* \* \*

John stomped his feet under the canopy outside the hospital’s emergency entrance, shaking snow from his boots and pant legs, then tug on his coat and ruffled his hair before heading towards the glass doors. They rattled a little in their tracks as they slid open, and John felt a tropical wind blow over him as he passed into the building.

A woman behind the desk looked up as he approached and told him “I wasn’t sure you’d make it or not.”

“I made it alright, Beth.”

“Whew, you weren’t kidding. It doesn’t actually warm you up, you know?”

“I know that, but I’m not going to be warm out there either way, so I might as well be happy. Is it really that bad?” John asked breathing

into a cupped hand.

Beth nodded and pulled and a pack of wintergreen gum from her pocket. "It's pretty bad." She held the green package out to him.

John pulled a stick from the pack, unwrapped it, and folded it into his mouth.

"Do you mind if I take a look at the admissions?"

"No, but I told you we didn't get anyone like that in."

John walked around the admitting desk and scrolled through a pink and blue and yellow, color-coded list on the computer.

"Mark and Greg are on their way back in with that car crash," a nurse walked by on her way through the hallway. "Unresponsive. Put him two." She continued down the corridor and through a set of doors.

"What car crash?" John asked.

"Nobody tells me anything. Right there is all I know," Beth said pointing at the computer screen.

John stood up and walked back into the small foyer between the two sets of automatic doors. He reached into his pocket and dug out his phone.

"Just answer," he whispered, thumbing the keypad.

Pressing the phone to his ear, he stared out the glass doors.

\* \* \*

Kathleen, back on her way into Marquette, had the heat on as high

as it would blow. Snow was melting on her body everywhere, especially in her shoes, but the only water that surprised her was that on her cheek. She had a lump in her throat and didn't exactly know why.

The radio was off, but she heard music. She turned off the heater fan, and found the song was coming from her pocket. She pulled out Tom's cell phone and read the outside display—"John".

"It better not be you, John," she said aloud as she opened the phone and lifted it to her head. "Hello?"

She heard a voice on the other end of the line stammer and stutter. "John is that you?"

"Kathy?" John managed at last.

"Yeah, it's Kathy. You know that kid?"

"Tom? Is he alright?"

"No, he's had an accident. He's got to be on his way in by now."

"You were with him?"

"Yeah."

"Is he going to be alright?"

"I don't know." Kathleen stopped at the intersection of M-94 and US 41. She pushed the signal lever up and tried her best to check for oncoming cars. Not seeing any, she started down the larger highway.

"John, did you give that kid anything?"

"No, I didn't. Like what? What do you mean?"

“Don’t lie to me.” She slid the car over into the first lane where there was less snow on the road.

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Damn it John, what did you give him?”

The wipers had collected so much snow on the blades they were no longer cleaning the windshield, just riding over the snow. Kathleen passed the cellphone to her right hand then clamped it to her ear with her shoulder. She rolled down her window, reached out and caught a wiper blade and let it snap back down on the windshield, knocking the snow from it.

“If I find out you had anything to do with this, I’ll kill you. I’ll report it. You really fucked things up this time.”

\* \* \*

John paced the short width of the foyer with his head bowed and his blue Motorola pressed to his ear. The doors, closed on both ends, gave him some privacy, but he kept looking up at Beth who had started watching him back. John turned his back to her and walked to the outside door.

“Kathy, I have something to tell you.”

“So, you’re admitting responsibility then?” came Kathleen’s voice through the speaker.

“No, but—um—Frank knows about you and Jeff.”

“He does?”

“Yeah.”

“How do you—how does he know?”

“I don’t know, he just knows. Everyone here knows—c’mon. It’s not like Jeff’s all that quiet about it. Frank—he—he just knows. I was talking to him earlier.”

“Would that be around the time I talked to you?”

“Yeah, when you called.”

“You lied to me, John. But, then, you seem to be doing a lot of that lately. You could have fucking told me.”

“I know. He didn’t want me to. He’s headed to Petoskey if you want to try and catch him. You should.”

“Oh, that’s convenient. I know you stole drugs, gave them to that kid...”

“He’s twenty-four.”

“...caused an accident, and now you want to send me out in a storm, where, hopefully, I’m never heard from again. You’ll even stay and work for me now. Do I have it about right?”

“No, I just thought you’d want to catch Frank.”

“And what, John—drag him back here?”

John heard her voice break and thought she might be crying.

“It’s all my fault,” her voice came at last.

“No, it’s—not—not all your fault.”

“John—“

“I mean Jeff is—Jeff.”

“John, I’m going to let you go.” Kathleen sniffed. “I’ll be there soon anyway.”

John clapped his phone shut and stuffed it back into his pocket. He stood for a moment looking through the snow outside the doors, then to the lobby and hallway. He grabbed the zipper at his collar and pulled it down to his waist. John took a deep breath and then a step towards the lobby. The doors slid open, and he stepped inside.

“I thought you weren’t working,” Beth said, looking at his shirt.

“Yeah, me too. Tell Kathy when you see her.”

John walked down the hallway to the nurses’ station and hung his coat in the closet. Then he went into the break room over to the coffee machine. He spit his gum into the garbage can next to the counter where the coffee sat, grabbed a mug from the cupboard and filled it. Steam rolled across his face as he tried to take a sip. He winced. The tip of his tongue felt like it had been clipped off and the stub sanded. He was sure blisters were forming on the roof of his mouth. He took another sip—bigger this time—and swished it around his mouth like mouthwash.

“John?”

John turned to see the head nurse in the doorway. He swallowed

his coffee.

“Yeah?”

“I thought you went home hours ago?” she asked. Louise was a nice enough woman, but that didn’t detract from the fact that she sort of looked like Nurse Ratched—a little older and shorter, maybe. It was something everyone who met her noticed, but at that moment, John was especially aware of the resemblance.

“I—um—decided to work for Kathy.”

“Good, it would have been nice if you had decided that hours ago. I could have used you. Have you clocked in yet?”

John shook his head. “No, not yet.”

“Well, hurry up. We have a car accident coming in.”

Louise disappeared from the doorway. John let out a chest-full of pent-up breath and drained the coffee mug into his mouth. He pulled a picture ID badge from one of his pants’ pockets and crossed the room to a computer monitor and keyboard. He swiped the badge through a groove on the keyboard, tapped a half-dozen keys and stood back, looking at the monitor. Then, he clipped the badge to his shirt and headed out of the break room and down the hall.

A stretcher pushed by two paramedics was rolling through the same doors John had occupied while talking with Kathleen. John recognized the paramedics as Mark and Greg. The figure on the

stretcher was covered from toe to chin with a blanket and wearing an oxygen mask. John started towards them a little faster than before.

“Put him in two,” Beth directed.

Mark and Greg turned to the right and John chased them down to Exam Room 2. The stretcher rattled and whirred like a shopping cart with a sticky wheel. Even though he just caught glances over Greg’s shoulder, and the patient had on that mask, John knew who it was.

Once in the exam room, John pulled the mask off Tom’s face and slid the elastic straps off his head. His face was slack. It looked to John like he was sleeping, or worse. Mark gathered up the plastic tubing and a steel oxygen bottle from between Tom’s knees, while John and Greg lifted Tom onto the examination bed. John placed a new oxygen mask on Tom’s face as Mark pushed the stretcher back out of the room and Greg settled into a chair in the corner.

“You know him?” Greg asked.

“Yeah, he’s a friend of mine.”

“He looks kind of rough. I don’t know what’s wrong with him.”

John said nothing—just started wrapping a blood pressure cuff around Tom’s arm.

“Pressure’s sort of up there. Heart’s all over the place. Wish I knew if he had taken something,” Greg said.

John inflated the cuff and let the air back out of the bladder while



listening in the stethoscope.

“You don’t have any idea, do you, John?”

“No,” John snapped, pulling the earpiece from his head. “Why would I?”

“I just thought because he’s your friend.”

“Oh, no. I haven’t really seen him a whole lot since his—his girlfriend died.”

“That’s it there,” Louise said walking into the room.

“What?” John asked.

“People always end up in here after relationship problems.”

“It’s true,” Greg added.

“Come on. People aren’t that dependent,” John said dropping the sphygmomanometer into a drawer.

“Every time a guy comes in here with a crazy accident, and he doesn’t smell like booze, there’s a girl involved,” Louise continued. “If she’s dead, it’s worse. I can’t imagine what he’s going through, but it’s not good. This is painkillers, I’d guess.” She took a pair of scissors from a drawer and started to cut off Tom’s shirt. “We’ll see what the doctor says when she gets here.”

John ran his hand over his forehead and through his hair.

“John, why don’t you get out of here? Go drink some more coffee. You look like hell,” Louise ordered.

“No, I’m fine. It’s just been a long day.”

“I heard you say he’s a friend of yours. I know you want to, but it’s better if you don’t help on this one.”

John nodded and started out the door. Kathy was just walking into the lobby. Snow still encased her hat.

“You see him?” she asked with a snarl.

“Yeah, he’s still not awake.”

“I see you decided to work for me after all. I guess I was right then?”

“I’m working for you because I thought it might be good if you talked to Frank.”

“Why do you care?”

John rubbed the back of his neck and looked down at the floor. “I sort of feel responsible, I guess.”

“Why, John?”

“Because, I was kind of the one who told him.”

“Why would you do that, John?”

“I felt bad for Frank. I guess I thought he should know.”

“It’s not your business, John!” Kathleen yelled.

Beth looked up from her desk at them. John put his hand on her arm and moved towards the doors.

“Get your hands off me.”

“I just thought we should talk more private.”

Kathleen covered her face with her hand, and John heard her sobbing. He put his hand on her back and this time she let him lead her out into the foyer.

“I’m sorry, Kathy,” he said when the doors shut behind them.

“It’s not your fault. It’s mine. I should have told him a long time ago.”

“I’m sorry though. I know it’s not my business. I really didn’t think about you—at all.”

“Maybe it’s best you told him.” Kathleen sniffed and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “Who knows when I would have told him? I tried, John, but it seemed easier just to let everything go on like it was. It can’t now. You fixed that.”

“I still should have left it up to you though.”

“You know where he’s going?”

“Petoskey—to his mom’s.”

“I’ll never get to talk to him there. His mother never liked me. She probably won’t even tell him if I called.”

“I really doubt the bridge is open. I’m sure he’s stuck in St. Ignace.”

“You really are trying to get rid of me aren’t you?” Kathleen smiled a little, though her eyes were still wet.

“No, I don’t even care anymore. I’m going to tell them.”

“What was it?”

“Soma. I didn’t think this’d happen. His back was hurting him—honestly.”

“I know, but that’s pretty harsh stuff.”

“I know. It was there. If there was Flexeril, I’d have grabbed that, but I guess I shouldn’t have grabbed anything.”

“Don’t worry, John.” Kathleen reached into her pocket and drew out Tom’s cellphone. “I have to give this to Louise anyway. I’m going to tell her he told me what he took. He probably won’t remember anyway.”

“You don’t have to, Kathy.”

“It’s alright, John. I know you didn’t mean anything. He told me something about a girlfriend? I’m sure you were trying to help.”

“Not thinking again?”

“Yeah, I suppose. But, I should get going. I might not be able to get back before dark as it is.”

“Are the kids going to be alright?”

“Yeah, Matt can handle things for a while. I’m going to have my friend Kim check on them anyway. Alright John, I’ll talk to you later, and don’t worry. This’ll turn out alright. Maybe for the better too.”

“Okay Kathy, be careful out there. And did you notice? I thought about someone else—your kids.”

“Very good, John. I’ll see you later.”

Kathy walked back through the doors and headed down the hallway towards the nurses’ station. John leaned against a glass wall of the foyer. His head felt light and buoyant like it was floating. He reentered the lobby and crossed it to the restrooms. Inside, he hunched over the sink and rubbed water on his face. He cupped his hand under the faucet and drank from it. He pulled a few towels from the dispenser and patted his forehead and neck. He mashed his wet fingers into the paper and threw the wad into the trash can, then shoved the door open with his forearm.

“Kathy just left,” Beth said as he passed her desk. John felt her watching him, looking for his reaction.

“I know,” he said, but wished he’d said something else or nothing at all.

In the break room, John found a Bank of America mug in the sink, which he believed was his, but he didn’t really care either way. He filled it three-quarters full with coffee and added a splash of water, then drank it down in two gulps. He refilled his mug with straight coffee this time and set it on the counter, then leaned against the cupboards next to it. He watched nurses, patients and family flow past the door for a moment, then closed his eyes.

\* \* \*

After filling up on gas and grabbing a cellophane-wrapped egg salad sandwich at a Holiday Station, Kathleen was out of town again and headed back into the country. Trees, instead of buildings, lined the road. She couldn't drive along the lake, straight to Munising because M-28 was still closed, so her best bet was to head towards Escanaba and away from the snowbelt in which she lived. When she was still in the City of Marquette, for whatever reason—buildings, streetlights—the snow didn't seem as bad as where she was now. White flakes streaked around her field of vision, *like Star Wars*, her son, Matt, once said.

Holding the steering wheel steady with one hand, she untangled the wrapper from the sandwich and began to devour one of the triangles, trying not to imagine how long it had sat on the shelf. She finished it and part of the other half before dropping the rest on the plastic wrapper and bundled it back up. Now, she gripped the wheel with both hands and concentrated on searching for the lines of the road through the layer of packed snow.

After an hour of seeing nothing but gray shadows of trees and colorless flecks, Kathleen passed the few buildings that marked the village of Trenary. A gas station, a diner, and a meat processing plant that only seemed to be busy during deer season—all hazy and washed free of color like she was looking at everything through a heavy, white sheet. Now, from there to the junction with US-2 was another hour of

nothing but forest.

By the time she reached US-2, the snow had changed. It was fluffier and slower. The road was clear for the most part as the flakes evaporated on it. She pulled into a convenience store/truck stop to top off her tank again. As she waited for the pump nozzle to shut off, she watched the sparse traffic on the highway—mostly semi-trailer trucks. She hoped they were coming from Sault Saint Marie—from Canada. If they were coming from anywhere else, The Bridge must be open, and Frank must be at his mother's. Kathleen could only imagine what that woman was telling him. Something inside the pump clunked and the handle clicked. Kathleen hung the nozzle up and screwed the gas cap back on the tank, turning it until it spun loose. She opened the car door and grabbed her purse from the car seat. Slinging the purse over her shoulder and slamming the door, she walked around the back of the car, flipping the fuel door shut on the way past it. When she reached the store's door and heaved it open, a warm blast of air and the smell of orange cleaner rushed over her face. Inside, a short, silver-haired woman looked up from a newspaper. Coolers hummed, and Kathleen heard the faint tune of a pop song. She walked by the aisles to the coffee station and filled a 24 ounce Styrofoam cup and wrestled a lid out of the dispenser. She fitted the lid to the cup and carried it to the counter.

As she set her coffee down and started digging through her purse,

she asked the clerk, “Do you know if The Bridge is open?”

The woman tapped keys and the register beeped as she said, “No, I don’t, not at this moment anyways. Last I heard it was, but that was hours ago. Gas?”

“Yeah,” Kathleen said and wondered who else was going to pay for her gas.

Another burst of beeping began.

“Who knows, though? I hear it’s closed and then someone comes in saying it’s open again. You could call The State Police or try and listen to that a.m. station that does the bridge updates—what is it? I can’t remember—600 something. Seven eighty-three, please.”

Kathleen slipped a five dollar bill and three ones from her wallet and handed them to the woman. “Thanks. I’ll try that.”

“Out of eight? Seventeen cents change.”

The clerk poured change into Kathleen’s palm, who then held the silver coins with her thumb and dumped the pennies into the have-a-penny-leave-a-penny-need-a-penny-take-a-penny dish.

“Somebody always needs one don’t they?” the clerk noted.

“Sometimes that person is me. That’s why I leave them—karma.”

“What comes around, goes around, right?”

“Something like that, huh?”

Kathleen stuffed her wallet back into her purse and let the change



fall in behind it. She picked up her coffee, oriented the lid hole to the front and took a long sip.

“Thank you,” the clerk said with a practiced voice.

“Thank you,” Kathleen replied. She thought she sounded more sincere somehow.

Kathleen took her coffee out to her car, opened the door and flung herself into the seat. She dug her keys out of her purse and flung it onto the seat next to her. There was a small bag of trash in the cup holder which she threw on the floor and replaced with her cup, then slid the key into the ignition and started the car. She pulled the gear shifter to drive and rolled towards the highway. With the left blinker on, she turned onto US-2.

The ride towards St. Ignace, the last city before the Mackinac Bridge, was a little better than before. It was supposed to be anyway, if she could actually see Lake Michigan sprawling to her right. She started gaining on a big rig in front of her and the spray and powder from its tires started to billow over her car. She inched out into the left lane and saw no one coming. She passed the truck, glided back into the correct lane and slowed down. With no one ahead of her, she felt a little more confident and accelerated up to fifty-some miles per hour and set her cruise control.

\* \* \*

Tom had been moved up to The Intensive Care Unit and out of John's department without him ever talking to him. John was told he'd be alright. It was a mild concussion and the drugs were out of Tom's system. He'd be awake soon. It was actually a slow day for a snowstorm, and John heard a rumor that Louise would let him go early—one of her sporadic bouts of compassion.

John was sitting at the break room table—again. He had a mug of coffee in front of him—an Iron Range Community Federal Credit Union one this time. His old one had disappeared somewhere. His brain was buzzing. He was sure he understood the meaning of that description now, because everything seemed to be buzzing, or vibrating at least.

“John, Louise told me to tell you to go home,” a young nurse named Jill who ducked her head around the doorframe told him.

“Thank God. I'm not going to argue with that,” John said standing up from the table and dumping his mug into the sink.

“I heard you had a rough day,” Jill said, walking into the doorway and leaning against the wall.

“You could say that.”

“I did. What are you going to do now?”

“Me?” John feigned a glance at an imaginary watch. “I'm going clubbing. What is it—noon? Night's just started.”

Jill laughed and headed back down the hallway.

John swiped his badge and clicked “clock out,” then walked over to the closet and found his coat. He zipped himself in and headed for the lobby.

“Later, John,” Beth yelled as the doors swooshed open.

“Bye, Beth,” he said, probably too quiet for her to hear.

John walked around the hospital and down the street, headed to a little gas station close to the college campus. He passed the massive structures—massive for Marquette—of Marquette General. The parking garage on his left, the skywalk overhead—he looked in the area of ICU. Tom was up there somewhere.

When he reached the store doors and stepped inside he heard the two clerks laughing about some girl being “so drunk that night” and the college radio station playing “Monkey Gone to Heaven” by The Pixies. John picked a six-pack of Bells Best Brown Ale from the cooler and took it to the counter. The guys at the registers stopped laughing and the one John stopped in front of eyed him up before ringing up his beer.

“Ten o-three, man.”

John dug in his pocket and came up with a ten dollar bill and a single. He dropped that on the counter and checked his other pocket.

“Pennies right there, bro,” the clerk pointed out.

John reached into the dish and scooped out three coins. “Come in handy sometimes, don’t they?” he said.

“Sure do.” He dropped the coins next to his ten and picked up his beer and the one dollar bill. “Thanks.”

“No problem, man.” Then he turned to his friend and continued, “man, she went upstairs with Josh and Adam. We could hear them through the ceiling, bro...”

John went back outside and crossed the street in the direction of the hospital. At the near corner was a bus stop where some of the nurses went to smoke and a few people caught a bus downtown. John set his beer in a snowbank and leaned against the Plexiglas. A couple of nurses from obstetrics were standing outside talking about their latest night on the town. John recognized them, but didn't know their names. All nurses from obstetrics were either sixty or twenty years-old.

“...and then when that one guy came up, I was like ‘hell no,’” one trumpeted.

“I know. He was like, so—uhh,” the other added.

John closed his eyes and tried to block the two out. He opened them again when he heard the grumble of a diesel engine and the screech of brakes engaging. A blue and white Bluebird Ford conversion pulled up to the intersection, and the door folded open. The girls laughed a little as John picked up his beer and climbed the stairs.

“You better not open one of those,” the driver, who looked more than a bit like a Latin-American Rick James, told him.

“I won’t,” John said dropping a dollar into the glass deposit box.

“Don’t you got no change?”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t matter to me,” the driver said, pulling the door handle and shutting the door.

John dropped into the first seat. The bus jerked to a start and began to roar through its gears. In his peripheral vision, John saw every head on-board bob together with each jarring shift of the automatic transmission. As the blue and white Ford picked up speed, the engine's rumble became deafening, the windows started to rattle, the wheelchair lift clattered, and something in the front chirped like a scared bird. Each bump or hole in the road the bus hit sounded like someone kicking a bag full of pot lids.

John looked around. There were only about a half-dozen other passengers—forty-year old guys who must have lost their licenses and people from the assisted-living homes. A shaggy gray-headed figure occupied the seat across from him. Looking down the grizzly figure, John recognized the haphazard scrawl on his coat and the canvas book bag. Susan. Susan looked up from his notebook, directly at John, and chuckled. John dropped his head and let his chin bounce off his chest a few times before looking back up.

“How are you, doing?” John asked, noticing how blue Susan’s eyes

were.

Susan's beard turned up at the corners, his cheeks dimpled, but he didn't show a bit of teeth.

"Me too," John answered. "Want one?" he asked, pointing at the six-pack.

Susan smiled broader, then looked back into his notebook and started writing again.

"Course not," John said, nodding in Susan's direction. "Crazy guys are never drinkers." Then, looking ahead, out of the windshield, mused to himself, "There's got to be something to that."

The bus continued on—picking up and dropping off passengers—screeching stopped and roaring again. When it stopped downtown, John stood up, grabbed his six-pack, and started towards the door.

Once John had plodded down the stairs and the doors shut behind him, the bus hissed and then rumbled away. John took a few steps towards a snow-covered bench facing the lake. He stopped in front of it, set his beer on the seat and dragged it to the right, scrapping a clean spot, which he sat in. John set the Bells next to his feet and pulled one bottle from the box. He twisted cap for a few seconds before remembering Bells used pry-offs. He took the bottle in his left hand and set the neck against the top rail of the bench, then slammed his right palm on top of the bottle. The cap flew into the air and John thrust the

bottle to his lips to suck off the foam.

He looked out over the frozen bay and watched shadows from the ice stretch eastward as the sun had already started sinking in the sky. A gust of wind picked up a swirl of snow powder and rolled it across the harbor. He took a drink from his bottle, swallowed and tried to find the horizon through the storm.

\* \* \*

Kathleen knew she was in St. Ignace when signs told her to slow down, and the two-lane highway branched into a four-lane—just to impress the tourists fresh off the bridge no doubt, because they wouldn't see another for a long time. The most important sign she saw though was the one that said “for bridge updates, tune to AM 530.”

Kathleen turned up the radio. A pop-princess was wailing about something. She depressed the dial, switching to the AM band and started diving through the frequencies. A voice materialized then dropped away. Kathleen tuned back a notch and it came back.

“...visibility. Winds thirty-five to forty miles an hour from the north-east,” a computerized man announced. “The Mackinac Bridge Authority has closed the bridge to traffic until further notice.”

Kathleen turned the radio back down and started studying the parking lots along the highway. Most were for gas stations and fast food restaurants, and most were rather empty. None were places she'd expect

Frank to spend any significant amount of time anyway. Then, just before The Bridge, was something more promising.

A dark diner sat on the south side of the highway, flanked by eight or nine tractor/trailer trucks and a few cars, among them, a blue Blazer like the one Frank drove. Kathleen turned into the lot and pulled up behind the Blazer. She read the license plate—*QB 632*. It belonged to Frank. After parking the car and bundling herself back into her coat, Kathleen headed towards the building. It was sided with rough cedar and painted a dark brown. Plastic, black-tinted shades hung in the plate glass windows. Once she stepped inside, it took her eyes a minute to adjust to the darkness, but that didn't stop her from trying to search the faces for Frank's. Men looked up from their plates of eggs and pancakes as she scanned the room. The shadows began to shrink, and it was only then that Kathleen spotted her husband. He was in the far corner, staring out a window overlooking the Straights of Mackinac and The Bridge, a cup of coffee steaming between his hands on a little table.

As Kathleen approached, Frank turned.

"Kathy? What are you doing here?"

"I wanted us to talk."

"How'd you..."

"John. And I know he's the one who told you. Don't blame him for anything. I made him. I'm sorry, Frank."



“Are you?” Frank asked, then looked back at the table and slowly rotated his coffee mug with his hands. “Why, Kathy?”

Kathleen slid a chair out from the table and sat down. She stared at Frank’s mug with him.

“I don’t know. I guess I didn’t think you’d ever find out. I guess I didn’t think about you at all.”

“What about the kids?”

“Or them either. I guess I was just selfish—selfish and stupid.”

Her voice stuttered and trailed off on the last word. She put her hands over her face and her shoulders shook. Frank took his own hands from his mug and reached for his wife.

“Don’t.” She pushed his arms away. “I don’t want you to feel sorry me. I don’t deserve...” Her shoulders shook more and she couldn’t finish the sentence.

Tipping his mug and rolling it along the table, Frank watched the coffee run off the ceramic, leaving a thin, brown film that followed an inch behind the rest. He let go of the mug. It rocked on its edges for a couple of seconds before it settled down. Frank’s hand crawled along the table towards Kathleen. He stopped it and laid his palm flat on the tabletop. With a quiet, faint voice Kathleen sobbed.

“Come on, come on. It’s alright.” His arm started for her again, then dropped to his lap.

“How can you say that?” She looked up at him. “You’re all the way down here.”

“I don’t know what I was doing. I just needed to think. I thought this meant you didn’t want me around anymore.”

“That’s not what it meant. I don’t know what I was doing either.” She wiped her eyes, smearing makeup underneath them. “Are you still going?”

“I don’t know. Should I?”

“No.” Kathleen shook her head and smiled a little, then wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

“Bridge isn’t open anyway.” Frank stood up. “Let’s get out of here.”

Kathleen nodded and stood up, letting Frank put his arm around her. He gave her a squeeze then let go and reached down for his coat. After he pulled it over his shoulders and zipped it up, he dug through his pants’ pockets and collected a small handful of coins—mostly copper—which he dumped on the table next to his mug.

Frank put his arm over Kathleen’s shoulders and together they walked out of the diner and back outside where the snowfall had begun to lighten.

### PART THREE

Tom woke up in a bed in a white room—mostly white, but with some brown or tan trim. Fluorescent lights shone down on his bed. There was a window to his right, but the curtains were pulled shut. On the wall beyond the foot of his bed, a dry-erase board informed him his nurse's name was Mary. Outside the heavy, wood door, Tom heard the public address system asking a doctor to call a certain.

Tom clapped his hands against his head and mashed his palms into his eyes, then pulled his down his face.

“Ah, you're up.”

Tom looked to his left to find John sitting in a chair, hunched forward, his wrists resting on his knees, a paper Starbucks cup between them.

“What happened?” Tom mumbled.

“Man, that's not a question for right now.” John picked another cup from the stand next to Tom's bed and held it out for him. “Want some?”

“Coffee?”

John nodded.

“Sure, why not.”

“Just don't tell anyone. I don't need anyone on my ass for anything.”

Tom took the cup from him and set it in his lap.

“Did you get in any trouble—you know?”

“No, you told the paramedics what you took, I guess.”

“I did? I don’t even remember what it was.”

“That’s the official story.”

“Ah, okay.”

“You’ll never guess who found you.”

“Frank’s wife—I remember them now.”

“Alright, you weren’t as gorked as we thought.”

“I dreamt of Laura again.”

John leaned back in his chair and took a drink from his cup.

“Yeah?” he asked.

“It was different this time—better.”

“That’s good. I’m sorry I wasn’t very supportive before it...”

“No—good actually. I felt good.”

John leaned forward again and rested his forearms on his knees.

“Me and Laura were in this big field.” Tom gestured a wide sleeping motion with his right arm, the saline IV tube trailed below.

“Then it started to get dark, and I noticed there were all these headstones, like we were in a graveyard—you know? Then this wolf started chasing us—this big, white wolf. We started running. At first I was keeping up with Laura, but so was the wolf. Then she got ahead of

me and she was a deer—like a whitetail deer—I knew it was still her—and she was getting away from me. I ran faster and knew that wolf was behind me too. Then, I was in this forest, full of all these nasty, twisted trees—like Halloween trees. No leaves, just gnarly trunks and roots. I couldn't find Laura anymore, so I just kept going. Until I came into this clearing with this huge spooky tree—like *The Berenstain Bear's Spooky Tree*. Do you remember that book?"

John shook his head. "No. No, I don't."

"Well, I started climbing the tree, and as I got closer to the top, I realized I was holding onto to rock. I got higher and it was a cliff. I got up on top of the cliff and there was the ocean—waves crashing—something from a movie. I could feel the wind, John. It felt good."

"That does sound good, Tom."

Tom took a sip from his cup, and John copied him.

"Do you think you could open the blinds?" Tom asked, looking towards the window.

"Definitely, it's gotten beautiful out there," John said getting up from his chair and going over to the window.