

The snow in the pub's windows glowed pink from the neon beer sign. During the rush, Mike had reported that it was fifteen below but closer to minus thirty with wind-chill. It was plus thirty degrees in the kitchen but when we finished our shift and trooped into the dining room for our post-shift beer, the cold found us at the corner table. We couldn't hide from the winter forever and every new customer that came in the front door let in another blast.

Mike worked the main bar and although he was busy with customers, he served us quickly and thanked us for taking a late order and sometimes he threw in shots but not that night. The pints warmed us for the moment but the winter waited for us on the other side of the door and it knew it would win and so did we.

Still, I offered another round but everyone agreed to move on and Jarrett said I could ride in his cab to the bottom of the Avenue. It was a kind offer so we zipped up our jackets and pulled hats on tight and put our hoods up and tucked in the spaces where the cold could sneak in. February attacked as soon as we stepped out the front door and sneaked past my layers of defenses to bare skin.

After ten minutes on a windy street-corner with our hands jammed in our pockets, a cab stopped and we jumped in, shivering and greedy for its warmth. Jarrett told the cab-driver where to drop me off. He nodded in the rearview mirror and accelerated slowly. The snow crunched and rumbled beneath our feet.

Through the windshield frame, the snow and street-lights made the world slow and orange. The cab-driver told us he was from the islands where it never snowed. Our laughs were polite but soon melted back into quiet and a minute passed until Jarrett asked the man to pull over. I thanked them both and put my hood up and opened the door and the wind blew and I stepped out into the open again.

The cab pulled away and the Avenue stretched out before me with the cars crawling up

and down and there was a the crest of the hill and a ways past that was home. The wind picked up and the light turned green.

My feet slipped crossing the street. Every step took extra effort. Snowflakes glowed in the halo of the orange street-light. There was a bus-stop a block away and I tried to hurry but my feet slipped more.

Cars slid by on their way up the Avenue. People huddled in doorways of stores and bars. No one waited at the bus-stop. I had missed the bus and a gust of cold wind found its way up my jacket. I jammed my hands in my pockets and pulled the jacket tighter.

Should I wait for the bus or walk the rest of the way?

It was a forty minute walk to my apartment on a good day. Another bus might be on its way or it could be delayed by an hour; there was no way to know. I stood by the low fence by the bus-stop and the snow crunched under my boots. I tried to think hard about my situation but the wind was blowing fierce down the Avenue and into my face and my eyes began watering and my forehead started to ache.

A woman and a man trudged past me, breath plumed from their drawn-up hoods. She laughed, 'I was just going to say that!' He laughed because a snowstorm wasn't so bad when you had someone beside you.

I felt poorer than I had ever felt in my life as I stood there alone by the bus-stop waiting for a bus that would not come to save me. Not having enough money meant working a job in a pub kitchen that I didn't like. It meant drinking after work to hide the anxiety of my direction in life and it meant not being able to take a warm cab back home because I spent what little money I had to feel better but it all ended up feeling heavier and left me out in the cold. Nothing was going to get me home faster and that was just my fate.

I turned to the parking lot behind the low fence where there the plows had left a

mountain of snow ten feet high and at the base a pair of leather boots stuck out. I stared at them but they did not move. They shined on the snow and gave nothing more.

I walked through the gap in the fence and crunched my way in the snow around the mountain and the boots were attached to legs and the legs were attached to a body. It was a person lying in the deserted parking lot on their back next to the mountain in a black winter coat, gloves and a gray wool hat. They did not move and they looked very small in the snow.

Kneeling beside the body, I studied the face and it was a woman with her eyes closed. I touched her shoulder but she did not move. I said 'Hey!' but there was no response and then I said 'Hey!!!' a little louder but there was still no response. It struck me that she might be dead and I took off my glove and touched her cheek. It was warm and soft and I was relieved.

I grabbed her shoulder and squeezed and there was a stirring and a cough and her arm came up.

'Are you okay?' I asked.

She struggled and I put my hand under her back to help her sit up and as she sat up and her mouth opened and closed and she pushed her hat up out of her eyes and I asked her in stilted French if she knew where she was and she mumbled and coughed again and stood up slowly on shaky knees. I began to say something else but she looked out at the street and turned and walked straight out the gap in the fence and out of the parking lot.

She crossed the street, weaving to the side and very unsteady. I watched for a moment, not sure what was happening but I knew that she needed help so I hurried out of the lot, waited for a car to pass and crossed the street after her.

On the sidewalk, she turned in a circle and looked up and the snowflakes were floating in the orange street-lights and I asked her in French if she knew where she lived and she said yes in French and she asked me where she was and I pointed to the street-signs and told her

the street corners.

She said she lived on a street just after the crest of the Avenue and looked at me for the first time and her eyes were shining and alive and her long lashes caught a snowflake and her eyes flashed at me and then down to her feet and she had dark hair coming out of her knit hat.

I looked up the hill of the Avenue and pointed and told her that I was walking in her direction if she wanted to walk with me because where she lived was not too far up the hill and on my way and she nodded with her eyes low and I started off and heard her footsteps crunching behind me.

The snow was not cleared on our way and we walked other people's footsteps and I checked back and the woman followed and kept pace. I was wary of keeping too close an eye on her as she had first met me in a parking lot and I couldn't imagine what she was thinking or how scared she must have been.

I asked her if she was okay and she nodded but didn't say anything else, she just followed. The mountain was erased in the snow on our left but the statue of the angel came into view.

We stopped at the crosswalk and she exhaled a plume breath. I asked her name and she said what sounded like 'Jeanne' and I asked if she had money for a cab and she shook her head and I said that I didn't either and the cars slid past us in both directions, headlights shined white and taillights red and the signal turned green for us and we crossed the Avenue.

After the stairs, I turned to check on Jeanne and she was walking almost next to me. The path through the park was tree-lined and the park was a lunar expanse of snow. Jeanne said something and I looked back and she made a motion with her hand and before I could ask what she meant, she took a quick step closer and put her hand out again and I understood and put out my hand and she grabbed it and held it tightly and we left the park.

We stopped at the next red light after the park and I asked her in French if she was from Montreal and she said that she was from France and I told her that I was going to keep talking if she didn't mind and she said she would like that and said she was from Bretagne and had been in the city six months and she worked at a coffee shop but I could not picture her behind the counter in her uniform.

I told her that a place up near my apartment had the best coffee and she said that wasn't true because the best coffee was in Little Italy and I laughed because she sounded so convinced and not like a woman who had just woken up in a parking lot next to a snowbank.

We went on like that for a while and I told her about why I lived in Montreal instead of somewhere else and I told her it was because it felt more creative and I talked about writing and the band and she asked if I was going to stay and I told her I thought so because it was good for artistic types and that rent was cheap and I didn't know how to say 'rent' in French but she adjusted her wool hat and her eyes flashed to tell me she understood.

We came to the corner of Rachel and St-Denis and I waited for an oncoming car but she stepped in to the street, pulling me with her and we crossed quickly and spoke about the winter and she said this was her first winter and snow was fine but snow with wind and cold was horrible and she was sick of it and I told her that she was right but need only wait another month and the city would thaw out and it would be worth it. The way I saw it, we put winters in the bank and we take summers out. She looked at me and nodded slowly.

We turned left on a small street and she let go of my hand and stopped and pointed and said we were at her building and I nodded and the snowflakes were floating in the street-lights on her street and I looked at Jeanne to say something but she threw her arms around my neck and held me tight and I held her and after long enough, I loosened but Jeanne did not let go and I held her again and Jeanne didn't let go for another moment and then she pulled away and

said, 'Bonne nuit.'

And I said, 'Bonne nuit,' and I wondered how I looked to her when she woke up in that parking lot with me standing over her with my four-month beard and beer on my breath. Jeanne's eyes were bright and calm and she was very alive and she turned and I watched her walk up her steps and into her apartment and the door closed behind her.

My home was still a ways away but I did not worry, I just walked. As I walked, I felt Jeanne keep pace next to me.