

ICE STORM

“Damn that woman, where’s the milk?” Norman slammed the refrigerator door, rattling the jars inside and releasing a gust of air. The disturbance caused his bathrobe to flutter around his bony calves like a flag in a breeze. “Can’t leave a man in peace,” he muttered. “Always sticking her nose in my business.”

Norman didn’t like his cleaning lady. She was bossy and grim, and her plain face matched her personality. Her name was Ethel Something-or-other, no family he’d ever heard of before, which to his mind was suspect enough in this small town. These days she came around every Tuesday morning, at the insistence of his daughters. Norman figured he was just fine without her, but Ginny and Pam insisted that he needed some help now that their mother had passed on. He disagreed – so what if he let the milk spoil once in a while? True, he couldn’t read the expiration date too well anymore, but was that going to kill him? And he could still handle a broom, thank you very much.

Ginny had asked him why he minded a weekly cleaning so much, but she missed the point. What Norman hated most about Ethel was how she put on airs. She was a constant, painful reminder of his advancing age. “Mr. Peterson, I’m your caretaker,” she liked to tell him. Did that give her the right to rummage through his dresser drawers, rehang the wrinkled shirts in his closet, clear out his refrigerator? Hell, no.

So here it was, Wednesday morning and no milk, all because of her taking liberties with his household. Now he’d have to drink his coffee black while he read the morning paper. He pulled his bathrobe tighter around his waist and opened the front door. Stepping onto the porch, he faced a glistening scene that made him draw in his breath.

While he was sleeping, an ice storm had silently coated the town with a sculpture worthy of Swarovski. Every twig on every bare tree was transformed into a glassy sheen. The morning sun bounced off every surface, setting the frozen landscape on fire. He stared in wonder for a few long moments, until the cold reminded him of where he was. Edging his way slowly down the slick walkway to retrieve the newspaper, he had to shade his eyes against the reflective brilliance surrounding him.

The crystalline scene sent him back instantly to an early spring day in college when classes had closed because of just such a storm. He'd spent that day in the student union at the bottom of Bascom Hill, shooting pool with his buddies and flirting with the girl at the coffee counter. Marie. She laughed when he lied that he was the most popular man on campus. She completely captured him with her curly black hair and snapping eyes, and he felt like a special holiday had been declared just for them.

After that icy day, he called on Marie regularly. She was studying literature, which Norman privately thought was a waste of time. For him, facts were what mattered. Engineering was a good solid field where a man could accomplish something. He had no use for philosophy or religion or make-believe stories. But he was a gentleman who liked pretty girls, and he treated Marie like royalty, then and ever after.

Smiling at the memory, unaware of the piece of ice nestling secretly under his slipper heel, he climbed back up the front steps with the paper tucked under his arm. As he shut the door and turned toward the kitchen, his foot went out beneath him and he landed with a loud crack on the hardwood floor. Grunting as he strained to sit up, he found he could only raise his head a little off the floor. Pain engulfed him with every attempted movement.

He looked over to where the telephone sat on a desk ten feet away. Okay, he'd crawl to the phone and call for help. At that moment, the phone began to ring. Lying on his side, Norman drew his legs up as close to his waist as he could and tried to turn over onto his stomach with his knees under him. Nothing happened. He set his jaw and tried to push with his arms to right himself. The phone rang on. Norman lay flapping as uselessly as a trout reeled into a boat. When the phone finally stopped ringing, he relaxed his arms, sighing with a mixture of chagrin and exhaustion.

His daughters had worried about just such an event. What if you fall, they'd asked. Who's going to check on you? It wouldn't be either of them, living on opposite coasts a whole day's travel from here. Not what he and Marie had anticipated – the family had been close back when they were growing up, with Sunday dinners at the grandparents' and weekend camping trips. It was still a puzzle to him how those girls could prefer to live so far away. They claimed that Wisconsin was too “provincial,” whatever the hell that was supposed to mean. Boring, was what he figured they were really saying.

Norman, you have got to get up, he told himself with clenched fists. If he didn't get himself out of this scrape, they'd send him off to assisted-living. He had fought tooth and nail not to be packed off with all those fossils and their walkers. He couldn't stand bingo, and he'd die of boredom. Then they'd all be sorry, for sure. Give him a Friday night at the Silver Lake Tavern instead, eating fish and drinking beer and hobnobbing with whoever came in the door. He still had his driver's license, after all - thanks in no small part to his good buddy Dr. Bob, who'd told the sheriff that old Norm could see well enough behind the wheel.

He lay on the floor, trying to think what he ought to do. As the morning wore on, he was conscious of being thirsty, and yet he peed himself twice. The pain had grown in magnitude like a piano crescendo, causing him to vomit what little his pre-breakfast stomach held, and by now it was fully in charge. The pain was a predator, gnawing at him with sharp teeth until finally he passed out. He partially regained consciousness from time to time, thinking once that he saw Marie tsk-tsking about the mess on the floor. She had always taken such good care of things, never a hair out of place. He felt apologetic and tried to say so, but it was too difficult, and he lost the will.

She had been brighter than he was, though he would never have admitted it. Nor would she have claimed it, as good as she was about keeping the peace between them. Lately he'd been thinking how much she really was capable of doing. She'd raised their daughters with little help from him, sewing their clothes, feeding them all from the vegetable garden whose harvest she canned, even making the quilts on their beds with scraps from worn-out school dresses. And always she wrote – in secret, she thought. But he knew. She probably feared that he would laugh at her, so she kept her stories tucked away in the back of her closet. It was only after she was gone that he dared to read some of them.

The morning that Marie couldn't remember how to make coffee had been the beginning of the end. He knew it in that moment. She'd begun to cry when she realized the enormity of it, and as he folded her into his arms, he felt that his knees might buckle if he didn't hold onto her. The idea of losing this bright, capable woman bit by bit, while she still stood before him, was an injustice that made him scream inwardly with rage. He had stayed alive all this time since, expressly so he could see her to the end.

Marie slowly faded from view. Had she been there? Norman didn't know for sure. He was motionless, rooted to the spot and suspended in time, as day slowly turned to dusk. *Dying now wouldn't be so bad*, he thought. He was no longer feeling too much pain, and it wouldn't be hard to just drift off. He didn't have much to go on for anymore without Marie, he knew that perfectly well. Just more loneliness and frailty, nothing really worth fighting for.

The putrid pool that he lay in reached his senses at least once upon regaining consciousness. *My God, what a filthy mess*. During one such resurrection, he remembered the First Responder bracelet that he wore. He'd always seen it as yet another indignity foisted on him by his worrying daughters. Part of him hated to do it, but he really did not want to be found dead in a puddle of piss and vomit, and so he pressed the button that sent a silent alarm off to whoever watched for such things. Then he slipped away again into blessed unconsciousness.

When he swam out of his fog one last time, he saw Ethel's sober face peering down at him. She began issuing directives to the paramedics, who scraped him up off the floor and onto a gurney. His initial wave of resentment toward her was nevertheless tinged with some relief. He knew that as soon as she had him packed into the ambulance, she'd turn to cleaning the place up. Soon it would be as tidy as a motel room, and just about as welcoming. He could almost smell the disinfectant.