

Across the Tundra

December 22, 1969.

Just turn around

was the thought that plagued me every step of the way.

This is stupid. I'm stupid.

I should just turn around.

But when I got to Dell Farms I knew it was farther back than ahead, and my dogged, irrational *WANT* kept me moving forward.

I had found the thermometer and was running it under the hot water, but the water was lukewarm and taking too long to heat up. And then I noticed Dad's cigarettes and lighter on the back of the toilet. So, I flicked his Bic and held the flame under the thermometer. And with a quick, tiny *POP* it exploded shattering glass and mercury everywhere. My heart beat furiously as I quickly unrolled sheets and sheets of toilet paper and sopped up (or at least contained) the glass and liquid metal, and flushed the whole thing down the toilet, praying it wouldn't clog. It didn't. And I found another thermometer and ran it under the now warmer water. 101°. Perfect.

"You get too excited over the holidays, Em," my mother said. "You make yourself sick."

"I know. I know," I said. "I'm sorry."

"I won't have time to come see you at lunch. Not with this storm."

Dad poked his head in. "Why don't you take her to the doctor?"

"She's got a low fever. She doesn't need a doctor!"

"I'll be okay. I can make myself soup."

"Dee'll be home by three. I'll be home by 5:30. You'll survive till then."

Dee poked her head in, sneered. "Faker. She's totally faking!"

I hated Dee.

"Could you close the door?" I moaned. "It's drafty."

"Maybe I should stay and watch after her?" said Dee.

"You get to school," Mom barked.

The wind was brutal despite the fact that every inch of my body except my eyeballs was heavily covered, head to toe. Goddamn snow from the past three days had piled up, but by 9:30 it had started to come down again in thick, gloppy white clouds.

The first leg up Donner Road, a tree-lined, closely pocketed residential street, was all steep uphill and I stayed on the sidewalks as there was nowhere else to go. If a car came by I'd have to crouch down or hide behind a tree. I couldn't move fast in the snow and my thick boots, so running was not an option. And if someone stopped me I had no clever excuse for what I was doing. So I had to be sure that no one stopped me.

I thought I could make the trip in about four hours. Two up, two back, give or take. But I'd never actually walked it all before, and certainly not during a snowstorm. But I was pretty sure I could be back by lunchtime, which was way before Dee would get home.

Fortunately, there was almost no traffic on Donner. I went slow, blending in to the bleak, ubiquitous snowdrifts and feeling invisible, something that I was used to. I imagined that hidden out here in the pure white, I would've made an excellent spy.

Want drove me up the hill. And *Want* had me slogging in knee deep drifts. But I was pretty sure what I wanted was still at the mall.

Covet Covet Covet

No! It's an Adventure! I told myself. It wasn't crazy. And so what if it was crazy? It wasn't a crime. I wasn't hurting anyone. It was a fair trade. A better-than-fair trade!

I reached the top of the hill and shuffled two blocks out of my way to Rose Briar to avoid the elementary school that sat at the top of Donner. To go around would take an extra ten minutes, but I couldn't take a chance on any kids or teachers spotting me, a wandering truant.

Goddamn snow. Tobogganing and sledding and snowball fights. Forget it. It was too goddamn cold with your face freezing and your nostrils getting all stiff and inverted. I had already spent three days shoveling and it was still coming down. But you couldn't not shovel. Not since Dad decided you were old enough. And six-year-old idiot Jay watching from inside the house only made it worse.

"I wanna shovel!" He'd say. "Why can't I shovel?"

"He can do my shoveling," I'd offer.

"You stay out of it!" Mom would say.

The Kapweskies got extra allowance for shoveling. And with this much goddamn snow they were probably rich by now. But we didn't get any allowance to begin with!

"It's slave labor!" I'd say.

"Damn right it is," Dad would say. "Now, shut up and shovel."

I circled back over Riley Road and made time towards Katie Marshall's house. Snow had gotten in my boots, my socks were damp, my face was tight with windburn, and I wasn't halfway to the mall yet. *I'm getting frostbite* I thought. *I'm losing toes.* Over and over like a song. But I wasn't going back. It was too late for that.

Around Katie's house – over the fence – and there was my first landmark, *Dell Farms*. Dell Farms' field was a massive pure white desert several acres across and straight through to the final leg of my trip, Highway 25.

Inching my way through the field, plucked balalaika notes from *Lara's theme* (from *Dr. Zhivago*) bounced through my head. Except I bet even in Siberia, they couldn't have been as cold as I was now. My back ached from hauling the backpack which I had to bring. I had to bring the backpack. And I did, so it was good. I was covered.

Covet covet covered.

My mind wandered. I wondered if any store in the mall sold a rope ladder. A rope ladder, I thought, would be a great highly useful gift for anyone. It had a million uses, like you could unroll it out of your bedroom window during a fire, or you could just use it whenever you wanted to escape. Yes, a rope ladder would be a terrific gift.

Then it occurred to me that if I got sick with fever it would actually serve me right, since I was supposed to be home with a fever anyway. And somehow that gave me comfort. But of course I had to actually get back home first.

I gave a tractor, chugging along in the far distance of the field, a wide berth, and picked up my pace. My Goofy watch told me I'd already walked 50 minutes, but now I knew the mall was close by.

Across the field, back on the sidewalk, two blocks over and I'd made it to Highway 25. But the highway was a busy road with traffic. My invisibility would be gone now, and I'd have to move super quickly. I kept my head focused forward. No eye contact with drivers. Didn't want anyone to glance over or stop. *Keep moving. Keep moving.* Past the bowling alley, the drive-through liquor, the McDonald's.

Mom and I had stopped at the McDonald's on the way to the mall two days earlier as a treat. I loved McDonald's and would've lived there if I could've. And Mom told me maybe next March we might even have my birthday there.

We ate, and as we returned to the car, she steered me from a bag lady, who was leaning up against a brown, beat-up station wagon and staring at the ground. Mom offered her a quarter and the rest of her McDonald's coffee, both of which the woman took, nodding appreciatively. As we hurried past the wagon, I could swear I saw two young kids - a boy and girl maybe - inside the car, and that they stared back out at me.

Achy and exhausted, I staggered past McDonald's, past the medical building, the Italian and Greek restaurants. And finally, there it was: Brightstown Mall.

Brightstown Mall, an outdoor mall. was a ghost town of linked stores that few people shopped at since glamorous Tri-County had opened two years ago. I hurried to the center area where all the open lanes of stores converged and where the "You Are Here" map was located. And what I'd come all this way for was there: the giant Christmas donation bin. A huge holiday-decorated, green and white cardboard bin stuffed with toys, dolls, games, and boxes. And on top was a large sign that said "Give to the Poor. Only Three More Days." And the bin was even more jam-packed than when I'd seen it two days ago with my mother.

I opened my backpack and took out the large, awful, plastic ring puzzle that I knew some other kid would no doubt enjoy much more than I would. And I put it into the bin and removed the only thing - the *only* thing - that I'd been thinking of for the past 24 hours:

A perfect, pink, utterly beautiful *I Dream of Jeannie* lunchbox.

And it was perfect, better even than I imagined it would be. And it didn't just look good, it *felt* good, felt *right* with me. Like it *belonged with me*. And I gingerly shoved it into my backpack. And as I turned to leave, a nearby elderly shopper sneezed.

"Bless you," I said.

"Thank you," she said, and went back to her shopping.

And I ran towards the highway.

I Dream of Jeannie was simply the best show on television. Jeanne was magical and beautiful and everyone loved her and she could do absolutely anything. One Saturday night, when my folks were having a card game, I dressed only in a towel and every time someone in the house needed something, I'd bow and say *Yes, Master. Yes, Master.*

"Hey, Em! Go grab me a beer!"

Yes, Master!

Dad and his friends thought I was hysterical. Mom thought differently.

"Stop that!" she'd yell. "Go put some clothes on!"

I was back home and in my pajamas in less than an hour. I blew dry my clothes, shoes, hat, coat, and scarf till they were spotless and warm. I believed I still had all my toes and no fever and I made myself some soup. And since I still had a couple hours before Dee would get home. I spent the rest of the afternoon lazing around in bed, appreciating the perfection of my new lunchbox, and happily, sleepily reading TV Guide.

I didn't know it at the time, but decades later I'd discover that I - a slightly pudgy, 10-year-old girl with poorly cut bangs - had just slogged through 6.4 miles of suburban tundra.

For a lunchbox.

By the next morning I knew I had to get rid of my new lunchbox.

Lumbering through the snow I had fantasized that I would take my new lunchbox to school and everyone would smile and be jealous and want to eat lunch with me everyday. And we would all talk about *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Bewitched* - which was good but not nearly as good as *Jeannie* - and *Laugh In* which was real funny. But of course now I realized that I could never ever use the lunchbox, could never even take it out of its hiding place in the hat box under my bed. Because if I did any of that, well then, *my mother would know*.

Where did you get that? she'd ask. *Who gave it to you?*

She wouldn't rest till she'd found out and I couldn't lie to her. She'd see right through me.

No, I could never use the lunchbox.

I was so angry with myself. This beautiful pink thing with big eyes and dancing cartoon Jeannie's all over it – and I couldn't even show it to anyone! How could I not have thought of that!? It was so obvious!

And now more than ever, I kept hearing Father Craig's voice in my head. *Covet covet covet*.

He had done his pre-Christmas sermon last Sunday with a special message to kids about not coveting and being happy with what you had. *Dare not to covet* he stated over and over. *Temper thy covetous thoughts. Remember, as you congregate, that to covet is a top 10 sin*. Father Craig must've said *covet* 54 times in that sermon. He said *covet* so much the word started to lose its meaning for me. He'd say *covet* and I'd imagine sitting on the living room couch with my feet up on the *covet*. Mmm, nice plush *covet*. Relaxing!

But oh man I had *coveted*. How I had *coveted*!

Part of the problem was that I had known exactly what I was getting for Christmas. Last year, Dee showed me exactly where Mom and Dad had hidden our presents - under the tarp in the far back of the garage loft. I had been mad at Dee. But this year I looked on my

own, and the shock was heavy. The pile was much smaller than last year's and the gifts were *awful*. There were knock-off toys, toys that looked used and re-taped, and the best of the lot was a *Dude Ranch Barbie* that I had pleaded for – but never gotten – last Christmas, and had since lost all interest in. (It was, after all, *last year's* cool toy.) The nicest thing marked for me this year was some giant, plastic, purple ring puzzle that no normal boy or girl would want.

“This can't be all of it. There has to be more coming, right?”

“Of course that's it,” said Dee. “They cut back Dad's hours. That's as good as it gets.”

“But their party! Why are they having a party if – ”

“They're not gonna *not* have their party – it's the biggest thing they do all year!”

Tears welled-up in my eyes.

“Are we out of money?”

“Jesus!” said Dee. “It's just temporary! Everything's fine!”

I couldn't sleep. The lunchbox was a *Tell-Tale Heart* beating maniacally under my bed, and burning a hole straight up through the mattress. Sooner or later Mom would clean under there and then the Gates of All Hell would open.

What have you done!?

But what could I do? Throwing away a perfectly good lunchbox would not just be wasteful, but horrifically uncharitable. And besides, it wasn't the lunchbox's fault that it was trapped under my bed. It was *my* fault. I had taken its purpose away!

The bin had said “Three More Days” and that was two days ago. Time was running out. I couldn't fake getting sick again and I certainly couldn't ask Mom to take me back to the mall. I needed a plan.

"Just throw it out!" said Dee. "What are you - five years old?! No one wants to hear about your stupid lunchbox!"

I had decided to confide in Dee only because I had run out of options. And besides, she was 16 and, theoretically, might have ideas. But in fact she was completely utterly useless.

"Grow up, Em! Some people have real problems!"

I went back to my room and slammed the door, and Dee slammed her door and locked it.

"No slamming doors!" Mom screamed from downstairs.

Dee's big thing now was locking herself in her room and crying over the latest boy who dumped her. Jay and I weren't allowed to lock our doors. But Dee said that, at 16, if Mom and Dad didn't let her lock her door she'd move the hell out and live downtown in a hotel. She acted like she meant it, but I sincerely doubted she had the balls to do it.

I buried my face in my pillow and cried. Dee barged in.

"You are *so* unbelievably stupid!" she said.

"Go away!" I said. "I'm sorry I even told you!"

"What I should do," she said, "is go down and tell her exactly what you did!"

"You wouldn't!"

"But if you behave yourself, I'll help you."

I gulped for air, unable to stop crying. And then I had hiccups.

"What's going on up there?!" Mom yelled.

"Nothing!" said Dee and she looked at me, angrily.

"Admit that this is stupid, and I'll help you," she said.

"It's – it's – it's – it's – it's not – it's –" I couldn't catch my breath.

She glared at me.

"It's stupid," I said.

And suddenly I could breathe again.

"You really can't throw it away?" she asked.

"No. No - it's - "

"You put another toy in there, so you didn't completely steal it - "

"It was a trade!"

"Can't you just donate it somewhere else?"

"I think I should put it back where I found it," I said. "I think that's what I should do."

"But it doesn't - "

"I've thought about this," I said. "A lot."

"I see that."

"What if the person who donated it the first time came back and noticed it was gone?

And called the police?"

She stared at me, confused.

"Are you out of your mind?"

"It could happen!"

"It could not happen! At all! *Ever!*"

"You don't know that!"

"No one cares about your stupid -"

"Hey! I want you both down here now!" Mom screeched. "We have guests arriving!"

I got out my backpack and began digging under the bed.

"I'm taking it back," I said. "Right now."

I was halfway down the stairs. Dee trailed me, pulling her coat on. Mom stared at us, aghast.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Left my coat at Katies."

"Which coat?"

"The other one."

She looked at Dee.

"You want her walking around in the dark, with all the drunks out tonight?"

"Five minutes," said Mom. "No more!"

"I can do this by myself!" I bellowed, trudging back up Donner Road. "I don't need you to come with me! I don't even care who knows! I don't care at all anymore! Send me to jail! Tell everyone! I don't care!"

Dee shoved me down onto the snow-covered sidewalk and knelt down hard on my chest.

"Get off!" I yelled, struggling.

"If I get off will you listen?!"

"No - yes - fine!"

She let me up and took the lead, walking with a determined look in her eye.

"Where are you going?" I called.

Three blocks up Donner, she stopped at a brown, icicle-covered Tudor and rang the bell. A slouching teenage boy with sandy hair and a crap t-shirt on answered the door. He looked at Dee, annoyed.

"So? What?" he said.

"We need a ride, Mike."

"Forget it," he said, shutting the door on her. But Dee jammed her foot in the crack, forcing it open. The boy fell back, surprised, and pissed.

"Hey - hey!" he yelled. "What the - "

"Your parents here?" asked Dee.

"Why?"

She looked at him, seriously.

"So, I'm pregnant," she said.

The boy went white.

"*What?*" he said.

"We need a ride, Mike. Now. Right now. Think you can handle that?"

Mike's dad stepped near the door, curious.

"Mike?" he said. "All okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Just give me a minute, Dad," he said, grabbing his jacket and keys and shoving Dee outside. Dee glanced over at me, her eyes lit up. A minute later we were in Mike's car and headed towards the highway.

"This is the definition of uncool, Dee," said Mike

"No one asked you," she said.

He glared at her, pissed.

"So, what - are you kidding?" he whispered to her.

"About what?" she said.

"Are you being funny?" he said. "Because if you're trying to be funny, you're not being funny. At all."

“What’s the difference,” she said. “Why should you care?”

He stewed, and glanced over at her.

"This is crazy," he said. "I'm supposed to be home tonight! We're having people over."

“So are we, shithead. So the sooner you get us there and back the better.”

I sat in the back seat, gripping my backpack. Dee stared coolly out the window. No tears came from her now. Mike kept glancing over at her looking for something.

“Mike?” I called from the back.

“What?”

“Do you have a rope ladder?”

“What? No.”

“What if you need one?”

“Why would I need one in a car?”

“What if you, like, drove off a cliff or a bridge and you were halfway off and you needed a rope ladder to climb down to a tree limb or something?”

“Then I guess I would die.”

“Not if you had a rope ladder,” I said, confidently.

And Dee and Mike briefly looked at each other.

Brightstown Mall. Mike pulled up near the curb. I got out.

“Goes much faster when someone drives you!” I said, cheerfully. I thought this was a great joke, but no one laughed. I could be on *Laugh In*.

“Do whatever you’re doing and let’s go,” Mike snapped.

“I’ll just be a minute,” I said.

And as I turned, I slipped on a patch of ice, went flying feet up, and landed hard on my back.

"Em!" Dee yelled out. "You okay?"

Bruised, but unhurt, I pulled off the backpack and opened it. I looked inside.

"NO!" I yelled. "*No no no no!!!*"

Mike and Dee looked out their windows. I held up the lunchbox. The side with the big pink eyes was entirely caved in.

The three of us entered Oberts – the large mall pharmacy – just as the tall, lanky clerk was closing up.

"We need a lunchbox *stat!*" I said. This was something doctors said on *Medical Center*.

The clerk shuffled through the tins on the back shelf, holding up different ones, moving others aside.

"This one?" he asked, holding a lovely new *Bonanza* box.

"No! No, the pink one!" I said, pointing.

"Ah," he said, handing me the lunchbox. "Well, that's very pretty for you."

"It's not for me. It's for charity," I said.

"Well, that's swell," he said. "That's \$2.50, please."

Dee and Mike looked at me. I looked back at them. Dee and Mike looked at each other and then me, again. The clerk looked at all three of us, confused.

"*Thieves! Gypsies! Degenerates!*" the clerk yelled from the door of Oberts. He went back inside and picked up the store telephone.

The three of us bolted down the mall lane. I clutched at the new lunchbox for dear life.

“Okay, so *now* you’ve stolen!” yelled Dee.

“I thought we were coming to donate,” I yelled. “I didn’t bring any money!”

“I had nothing to do with this!” yelled Mike. “I am *not* going to jail!”

“Aiding and abetting!” yelled Dee.

“It’s not stealing!” I yelled. “I have \$2.50 at home! We’ll bring it later!”

“We’ll be in prison, later!” yelled Dee.

We got to the center of the mall, where all the stores converged, and stopped cold.

“So where’s the bin?” said Mike.

We looked around. The entire center area was empty except for dull gray concrete, dilapidated benches, and untended plants. The bin was gone.

“It was here,” I said.

“It ain’t here now,” said Mike.

“Hey! Hey, you!” yelled the clerk running towards us with a grizzled Mall Security Guard trotting alongside him.

“Come on,” said Dee. We ran to the parking lot. And a minute later we were back on the highway with two hot lunchboxes.

Highway 25.

“That’s it,” said Mike. “I’m taking you home”

“We have to get rid of these lunchboxes,” said Dee.

“Wait - I know,” said Mike. “Here – ”

He reached back, grabbed the dented one and flung it out of his open window. Behind us, there was a *screech*, and the sounds of a car swerving and metal being crushed. My eyes bugged out.

“*What the hell, Mike!?*” said Dee.

“Gimme the other one,” said Mike.

“No!” I said, holding it tight, and then, “*Wait! Wait! Pull over!*”

Mike lurched the car and suddenly we were in the McDonald’s parking lot.

“There! Pull over next to that station wagon there. The brown one,” I said.

Mike pulled next to the battered wagon that I’d seen two days ago with Mom. The old woman was still there giving McDonald’s scraps to the two kids in the car. I could see now, the little girl was about Jay’s age. I got out of Mike’s car and went to them. The woman eyed me, confused.

“Hello. Hi. Merry Christmas,” I said. “I’m sorry to bother you. I just – ”

The little girl looked at me, a little frightened.

“Hey, how are you?” I said. “Would you –maybe like a new lunchbox?”

I held it out to her. She eyed it, curious, but excited.

“It’s brand new. Really. It’s all yours. I mean it. No strings attached.”

The girl looked at the woman. The woman looked at me, slowly, then approvingly, at the girl. The girl nodded at me. I handed her the lunchbox and her eyes lit up like magic. And then Mike was next to me, practically towering over me, and reaching out to the little boy in the car.

“I don’t have anything nice – but I got this,” he said, handing a stained, beat-up NY Giants cap to the boy. The woman rolled her eyes, but nodded to the boy, who took the gift, eagerly. Mike looked at me and shrugged.

“Merry Christmas!” I said, and we got back in the car and sped off.

As we drove, Mike looked at me in the rearview mirror.

“Yer a lunatic, y’know?” he said

But I just smiled, content.

Two days earlier I had been to Oberts with my mother. I loved Oberts – the mall drugstore with its candy and comic books and not-so-bad drugstore toys. But the best part was the massive number of new lunchboxes lined up on the shelves behind the counter.

“Pick one you like,” my Mom had said to me. And my heart beat so fast, because now I knew – *I knew* – there was another Christmas gift coming this year that wasn’t in the garage. And I knew exactly which lunchbox I wanted.

I pointed to the pink one, and the nice, tall clerk handed it to me. And Mom smiled and paid him.

And then, silently, she led me to the center of the mall where we could donate our most prized earthly possessions to those more in need.

“Put it in, Em! We don’t have time for this!”

“No!” I said, clinging tightly to the box. “No, it’s mine! This is mine! I thought we were donating something else!”

“Don’t be stupid!” she said, tearing the lunchbox away from me and throwing it in. And I stared, horrified, as my perfect new lunchbox fell sideways into the donations bin. And squeezing my arm, she dragged me, screaming and crying, back to the car.

By the time Mike pulled up to our house it was dark out, and an hour and a half from the time we’d left. From the outside, the house glowed beautifully with holiday lights and the family and guests inside bustled about, making merry.

“Thank you, Mike,” I said and got out and started towards the house. Dee, inside the car, hesitated.

“Why don’t you come in?” she asked Mike.

He looked down.

“Dad’ll be worried,” he said.

“Yeah,” she said. “Well, whatever, anyway. Thanks.” And she got out of the car.

“Dee,” he said.

She looked back at him.

“I’ll call you,” he said.

And at the door, Mom, in apron, stood waiting for us, arms crossed, her face beet red.

Later that night, I found Dee in the corner of the living room, among a sea of family. She had melted into my father’s recliner and looked sleepy, but content. I sat cross-legged on the floor next to her. And for a long while we both sat and said nothing. Finally, I broke the silence.

“I think that was pretty cool,” I said. “I think.”

“It was *awesome*,” she said.

“Dee,” I said. “Are you really – ”

She looked at me with a long, wistful glance but said nothing. She just took a deep breath and gave a half-smile. Whether she was or wasn’t didn’t matter. But after that night, I never heard about it again.

Christmas morning brought a stack of neatly wrapped presents under our massive tree. Jay, tearing open gifts, was as cheery and thrilled and surprised as ever. And Dee and I

faked our surprise as effectively as we always had. In fact, every time we gasped or squealed, we looked at each other, happy and knowingly.

And then my mother stepped over to me with a final box that was new. A lunchbox-sized present that I hadn't seen or accounted for. And she smiled as she gave it to me, as if she knew more about the last few days than she'd let on. I took the box and tore it open, and there, on the inside, was a brilliant new Polaroid camera. And a package of film. And a 10 flashbulb stick.

Oh my God!!!! I thought. A Polaroid camera! No one at school had a Polaroid camera!

I hugged my mother tightly. And then I spent the rest of the day taking instant snapshots of her and Dad and Jay and everyone in the house, and the house itself, and the cars, and the neighbors, and the neighbors' cars, and the dog. And we went over to Mike's and took a picture of Mike. And Mike and Dee – and that was a little weird but nice. And then I ran out of film

So, the very next day we went to Oberts and bought more film. And Dee took a great picture of me giving the very nice clerk at Oberts the two dollars and fifty cents I owed him, which was almost – but not quite – all the money I had in the world. Which was fine.

Because, honestly, I didn't even miss the stupid lunchbox.