

## THAT WINTER

I've had trouble sleeping ever since Eileen's death. After waking up again in the middle of the night I'm sitting down to write out my thoughts. Sometimes this helps.

Jon's been my neighbor for six years. Eileen moved into his house two years ago. She brought me a pumpkin pie even though she was the one who should've been receiving welcome gifts. It was delicious, but don't worry Mirabelle, I still prefer your apple pies.

Eileen was the sort of person who smoothed everything over. Before her arrival Jon and I rarely spoke. Two days after she moved in, he and I started playing chess together. Soon after we started having weekly dinners together.

They spent many nights on their couch, watching TV in front of the fire. The walls dancing with commingled light. The comfort their TV leant them bled onto me and I considered buying one so we could watch the same shows and discuss them, but my games with Jon were interesting enough and Eileen was so friendly that I never bought one.

Jon is a very tactical player. Which is a challenge since I don't see the combinations and sacrifices I used to. Now my game is based more in strategy and defense, but back in my twenties, a match between Jon and I would've been explosive, although fifty years ago Jon wasn't even alive. Our games are quiet, drawn-out affairs where I restrict his pieces while he tries to break free.

This sort of play isn't exciting to people. They see winning by a pawn or forcing a draw as stodgy and embarrassing, but it's more and more how I have to play. Trading and improving my pieces slowly and carefully, avoiding complicated exchanges. The way Warren Buffett invests.

Playing this way allows me to continue, but I miss the old games and Mikhail Tal was the king of that style. I'm studying his games to revisit that thrill and possibly improve my defense against it.

Tal once said, "You must bring your opponent into a forest where  $2+2=5$ , and the path leading out is only wide enough for one." I could almost those words coming from Jon.

One morning, a month ago, Eileen ran out during a snowstorm and slipped on the ice. She landed awkwardly on her side, headfirst. Jon rushed to her while I called 911, telling myself she'd be standing again before someone answered. But she didn't stand and Jon waved for help just before they were enveloped by a gust of snow. Behind snow screen, his shadow heaved over hers. I like to believe that while I rushed to dress, Eileen offered Jon her final words or at least listened to him beg her not to go. He deserved some shred of grace.

When the ambulance arrived I corroborated Jon's account of the fall. I didn't enjoy seeing him answer those questions. Everyone knew how much he loved her, but they had to follow procedure. The young EMTs reminded me of the men who showed me Mirabelle's car after the accident. A mustached man with glasses squeezed my shoulder while informing me she was dead. I thanked him before I understood what he'd said.

Afterwards Jon looked at me as though I was a coat he found leftover from a holiday party. He proposed to Eileen this past summer. I received an invitation to the wedding a week before her fall. In loopy cursive she announced their wedding date was May fifteenth. She drew cartoons of her and Jon holding hands on an oversized swing. Him with glasses and wild hair, her with a bow in hers, both with muted expressions, the way Howard Schultz might draw monks. Carelessly I'd left the invitation out on my mantle during Jon's first visit after the fall. He didn't mention it.

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I jerked upright and kicked the chessboard over. The chess book on the coffee table was turned to a game of Fischer and Tal's. I must have been playing through it when I nodded off. Sometimes I closed my eyes to picture outcomes.

I knelt to gather the pieces, trying to remember where they'd been in play when my hand grazed something soft under my chair. It was Jon's black scarf. He'd worn it tied around his arm for weeks after Eileen's death. During our game the other night I finally convinced him to take it off. He must have forgotten it.

He got the idea from her. In October, she organized a Halloween exhibition for the Historical Society where she worked. Our town was a Huguenot settlement, so some buildings predate the declaration of independence. They gave tours in the summer, but that wasn't possible in the winter so they always made one last fundraising push in the fall. She said some of her coworkers hated the idea, but she recreated a traditional 1800s wake in one of the recently restored farm houses.

In that time death was more common and public. Wakes were held in homes with the body usually on display in the parlor. For the exhibition, Eileen had a false body in a coffin surrounded by mannequin mourners with black bands tied around their arms. She hung placards throughout the house explaining the old rituals for death.

It was one of the historical society's most successful fundraisers but it gave Jon an idea. I can't say whether Eileen would've wanted her wake to be like that, but maybe she said something after the exhibition. A faulty mannequin wound up at their house too. Eileen was supposed to return it for credit, but they wedged it between the refrigerator and the wall. They named her Edna and during our dinners they would ask her to bring out more drinks or make dessert.

Their wedding date was set for the spring but they'd already signed the papers at the courthouse, which meant Jon could make the necessary arrangements. This was fortunate because Eileen's parents lived in Europe and never visited. I'm not sure Jon even told them. Eileen would discuss almost anything but her parents, so I didn't know what happened between them.

When the funeral director couldn't find a law against it Jon forced him to return Eileen's body. He then hosted a wake at his house, with her in a coffin in their living room. The makeup made her skin look pale and dry. Jon wore all black with that scarf tied around his arm. It was too long so some of it dangled loose. He stood next to her coffin for the entire wake. He was like that at parties, staying beside her like a nervous dog.

Twenty minutes in, someone finally said something. How could you do this? someone asked. Jon just shouted back that it was how it should be. Said hiding the body would only obscure her death and bringing it out in the open was the only way to move beyond it. Kept saying the way out was through. I doubted the pop-psychologist who coined the phrase had ever expected it would be used like this.

The few people who didn't leave immediately left after his outburst. Soon it was just Jon and I. He told me the funeral home couldn't bury her until spring because of the cold. He looked like someone in remembering something they'd repressed. I can't do this again in a few months, but Eileen hated cremation. She said it was another way to make the unpleasant disappear. He asked if I'd come to the burial whenever it was, and I, of course, agreed.

A blizzard kicked up soon after and I left before the funeral home came for her body. The snow droned on for days.

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If it weren't for Jon finally shoveling out his driveway I might finally sleep. A week ago, winter looked like it would never end. It had snowed on and off for days. I'd been stuck with a particular chess problem and thought a walk might offer me some insight. To anyone else, it was too cold but I was desperate. Without work, children or a spouse, there were only so many ways I could outpace boredom.

In summer, tourists and locals wander down our street. In June they linger in the evening to watch the fields light up with fireflies, in July they paw through yard sales to pass time before the fireworks, and in August they drive past the historical buildings on the way to the pool.

In winter the street goes unvisited which leaves its beautiful starkness undisturbed. Large fields with bits of wheat sticking up fade into trees which the Shawagunk mountains rise up behind, their steep, granite faces snow-speckled. Skytop Tower sits atop one of them, popping out of the landscape. It's part of Mohonk, an old hotel that was too expensive for Mirabelle and I to ever stay in although we sometimes visited for the day.

A few blocks past us is the church where Jon and Eileen would have had their wedding. A large, brick building with a modest steeple, built in 1789. There's an estuary behind it where herons sometimes tip-toe hunting fish. In summer the sun sets into the marsh and lights the water pink-turquoise.

Out of distraction and insistence, I decided to walk my normal route despite the wind chill and gusts of snow. When the wind died down I set out on my usual path, past the church and back down the rail trail behind our houses. The loop was 2.2 miles but I had a heavy coat, boots, hand warmers and doubled socks. I wouldn't push too hard, but I couldn't stay inside alone any longer.

The road had been plowed recently enough for me to walk along it easily, but at the rail trail my progress slowed. It hadn't been shoveled out but still I pressed on. Snow pulled my feet down and each step came more slowly than the last. Cold wormed into my socks, hands, and bones. Soon my teeth were chattering and I decided to cut off the trail toward my house. The trail leads past my house and I'd have to walk back down the street to it, but at this point I didn't know if I could. Cutting across the field and through Jon's backyard would save me precious steps.

Only animals had passed through the field though, so the snow was loose and unpacked about a foot deep. In the distance, my house's glow beckoned me on. I imagined its warmth as I plodded deeper into the field and closer to my house, but in the middle, I fell. The wind kicked up and spirals of snow danced across the ground around me. I lay still and watched.

I didn't know how long I sat there but soon the snow I'd fallen into felt strangely warm. I knew that was wrong, but still I considered staying put, maybe even digging down in search for trapped heat, trying to improvise some shelter. My house looked farther away than before but the screech of a screen door snapped me out of it. It was Jon going back inside after a cigarette, Eileen never let him smoke inside. I called his name but he didn't turn.

I struggled upright and shuffled toward the house. My limbs were watery and weak and the temptation to lie back down still remained, but I walked. Eventually my steps built a rhythm.

The brown tarp on Jon's back deck almost matched the wood. If I hadn't been so exhausted I probably wouldn't have looked for long. It took me ten steps to recognize the shape under the tarp. The too-pale, white ankles in the gap snapped the form beneath into focus. It must have been Edna, the mannequin from Jon and Eileen's kitchen. Maybe it reminded him too much of Eileen.

I was too old to be out in the snow like this and too tired. I pressed on and reached the bushes at the edge of my yard. They crackled as I passed. I collapsed inside my mud room and despite feeling all of my seventy-one years, for the first time that winter I felt lucky.

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By the next morning, after coffee and with blood back in my feet, the events of the prior day felt far off and inconsequential. Why worry about Jon putting a mannequin outside? Who cared if he put it on his back porch and smoked cigarettes beside it?

I went food shopping and took a drive afterwards. The Norwegian stillness of the landscape combined with piano concertos and blasting heat made me very tired. The easy, familiar curves of the road didn't help. My body felt heavy and dense, but someone was walking in the road at the overpass and that pulled me awake.

Since Mirabelle's death I've worried I would die in a car accident too. I shouldn't have been driving or doing anything. Insomnia was making me reckless. I needed to drive home and rest, these windows of sleepiness often closed suddenly, but I couldn't leave this man in the road like this. They didn't even have a coat.

I slowed down and saw it was Jon. He had a sweater and a hat, but it was twenty-two out. I rolled the window down and called him over, chiding him into my car like he was a child who'd misbehaved.

I asked him to play chess but he just stared past me. I told him how I came here on nights when I couldn't sleep to watch the cars pass. If a storm was approaching at night the headlights made the salt glitter like broken glass.

Jon didn't say anything and I worried he'd been out in the cold too long. Maybe he had hypothermia. I cranked the heat and started to drive back. His unresponsiveness made further questioning absurd.

Snow squalled up around us and I had to pull over. When the white screen thickened, I gave in and asked what he'd been doing out there.

"Just thinking," he muttered, his teeth still chattering.

"I did a lot of that after Mirabelle died." I had wanted to tell him about her since Eileen's death but I could never find the right moment. Even years later it was hard not to mention her.

Jon stared down the road like it would never end. The snow continued falling and I clicked the hazard lights on, their clicking only worsened our silence. Jon just stared and I turned up the radio. Rachmaninoff filled the car.

"When did she die?" he finally asked.

"Seventeen years ago," I said, perhaps too quickly. Another reason I hadn't mentioned Mirabelle to Jon was because he hated small talk and might say anything.

"Most of the time the quiet bothers me. Reminds me of when I was alone. All the empty Saturday nights where you tell yourself again and again how wonderfully everyone else's evenings are going, that envy and regret piles around me until I want to scream, until I feel like I'm drowning. It's worse when the silence is peaceful, then I just feel guilt," Jon said.

"Mirabelle was always the quiet one. Who knows, maybe they're up there commiserating. Saying 'At least we don't have to sit through another one of their chess games.'" He finally laughed but before that I remembered what I had seen on his porch.



The wipers squeaked off snow, but even on their fastest setting, the windshield was covered in snow before they returned.

“I got stuck out in the snow the other day myself too,” I said. “I went for a walk, my usual route down Huguenot and back down the rail trail, but there was too much snow and the wind kicked up so I cut across the field behind our houses,” Jon turned to me, “I fell. You were out on the porch, I called your name but you didn’t turn. You just went back inside.” Jon continued watching me. “What I mean is, we need to prepare better for this weather. Can’t just pretend it’s not fifteen or twenty degrees.”

He nodded but didn’t apologize. He looked like a man who was sorry for the way his life had unfolded but not for any single action he’d taken.

“It’s good you’re cleaning up. Changing things in the house helped me, minor changes like moving the bed or cleaning became ways to make that change visible.”

“Nothing’s been invisible about her absence,” Jon said.

“I’m sorry. I meant I could help bring some things back to the historical society, for you, if you wanted. You probably don’t need stuff lying around from the wake.”

He looked away as the snow tapered off. “Maybe,” he said slowly and I tried not to regret picking him up. I’d only tried to help.

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Writing this other ways has done nothing. So, I won’t write that I followed him out to the field the other night and found him disposing of mementos, heeding my advice, or found nothing. Writing this might not even help, but at least it will be the truth. I’m sorry Mirabelle.

Sometime after midnight several days ago, I'd been up, unable to sleep when I heard him pack something into his car. He kept looking around behind him and I couldn't lay in bed worrying so I drove after him with my lights off to one of the farmhouses further down Huguenot.

I watched him drag something across the field behind him on two plastic disc sleds. The owners of that house only summered here, they stayed somewhere warm in winter. I turned my car off as he and the sleds sank into the dark. That day had been one of the first in the forties but that warmth only made the night feel colder.

I sat trying to view whatever he might be doing in a positive light, but I kept worrying that he had gone out into the field to kill himself. There's a chess saying not to fight ghosts—to confront your opponent's plan, not something you've imagined. So I followed him out into the field.

Snow crunched underfoot, punctuated by a metallic sound. Jon was hitting the ground with something. Chink, chink, chink. The pickax came into view as did the human-sized bundle on the sleds behind him. A couple shovels stood in the snow, at attention, like scarecrows.

I considered grabbing one of the shovels before I said anything, just in case something went wrong, but the sight of Jon looked stopped me. Usually his hair was in disarray and his stubble more salt than pepper, but he'd shaved that night, maybe even slept. He hadn't looked like that since Eileen died.

I had to say his name twice before he looked up. He did not look surprised. We bickered back and forth. He wouldn't even look at me, even told me to go back to sleep, but I wouldn't leave.

Part of me wanted him to lie, so I could go back home, but I already knew.

After a few minutes of me standing there, he slammed the pickax down and turned. “Eileen wouldn’t want you here. Wouldn’t want me to involve you. This is my mess.” He used the mock-polite tone he sometimes used in our games when he interrupted me before I made what he considered a blunder. You don’t want to go there, he’d say. It was half-threat, half-plea.

“It’s my choice.”

“You sure?” I nodded and he inhaled. “That’s Eileen’s body. Recognize the tarp? She’s been wrapped in that since the funeral home left her here after the wake. Because of the blizzard they didn’t pick her up that day or the next and somehow they forgot her, they forgot my wife. I put off calling them, told myself they didn’t deserve to bury her, that I couldn’t keep sorting those kinds of things out, but I always thought they’d eventually remember. By the time I realized they wouldn’t, five days had passed. By then I couldn’t call. Keeping her was my only option left.”

I wanted to disagree. To say that it was their mistake and that he wouldn’t be punished for it, but there were reasons he wouldn’t think so. Our town was small and the people who lived here were bored and nosey. Jon was lonely, mostly asocial and easily embarrassed, which made him easily misunderstood. The wake couldn’t have helped. If he told them he might have gone to jail or simply been outcast. Telling Jon he should have called was useless now.

“I told myself I was worried about tenure, but even I can’t believe that,” Jon said and laughed weakly.

“You’ve had her like this for a month?” I said as I realized it.

He nodded and looked at the ground. Dirt splattered the snow around the hole he’d begun. “I tell myself that burying her here will make amends. Over there is the Huguenot cemetery she loved, the LeFever plot,” I knew it—it was smaller. It lay at the end of a long tract of unfenced

land. Maybe eight or nine graves huddled off to the side of someone's house. Two tiny graves for children and an obelisk for the father, the only grave large enough to spot from the road.

“We'd visit it on our walks and she'd marvel over when graveyards were crafted with the attention they deserved. After what I've brought her into she deserves to end up somewhere she'd like. Not a cemetery with mass-produced graves she hated, but she wouldn't want the LeFever graves disturbed, not that I would, even for her. Maybe burying her here will be enough.”

I could remind him she was dead but why? The conversational equivalent of the Ruy Lopez followed. I asked why he'd kept her and he said initially he thought having her there would help. Said he wasn't sure if he could be alone again. The same thinking that had allowed him to host a wake in his house let him do this.

“What happens now?” he asked with the resignation of someone long accustomed to life's disappointments.

I like to think this would've played out differently had I actually had any sleep but, even well-rested, I believed people deserved a chance to repair their mistakes. Jon wasn't just my neighbor, he was my friend.

I helped him dig but promised myself I would turn him in after she was buried. That way whatever happened, he'd have at least kept his promise. Perhaps I could help explain that it wasn't his fault.

Jon and I weren't ideal gravediggers by any means but still I couldn't believe how hard it was. The sky blackened as we dug and the inside of one of my gloves became wet and cold. I was bleeding.

My skin was thinner now but my doctor said it was common at my age. He recommended moisturizing regularly, but I always forget. I pulled off the glove and dabbed at my hand. The cut wasn't bad enough to stop me but the cold temperature only made my aches worse.

At four feet down our progress slowed. Maybe the soil was packed tighter here, or we'd struck a patch of frozen earth, or our exhaustion was finally taking its toll. I began to worry we wouldn't finish in time. Digging in the back of a field in the middle of the night was one thing, at sunrise it would be another. My body pushed on but my thoughts kept turning back to Eileen.

It was easier to think of the tarp she was wrapped in as holding just leaves and sticks. When she was alive, Eileen entered rooms and greeted people with loud, bright hellos and hi beautifuls. She walked through the world like she belonged in it. On hikes, I imagined her greeting trees and birds the same way, like a living Snow White. She made the world more welcoming for people, particularly Jon.

By no stretch could I consider what we were doing right but I saw why Jon couldn't bury his wife in the spring, couldn't violate her wishes, and couldn't endure the embarrassment of explaining what had gone wrong, and so I had to help him.

The soil loosened and our progress returned to a reasonable rate. We'd only finish burying her before sunrise if filling the grave went faster than digging it.

Watching Jon made me regret the way I'd planned Mirabelle's funeral. I did exactly what the funeral director recommended which everyone did, so she had a typical funeral. I read a poem about loss to a crowd of her friends, who had tolerated me when she was alive. Some of them winced during my speech, a speech which failed to even hint at her importance to me. I had the trauma of death as an excuse, but so did Jon.

He stopped digging and the night folded over us. He patted my shoulder, maybe I'd been crying. "I shouldn't have let you help," he said.

"I'd have turned you in if you didn't," I said and he glared like he just realized his queen was pinned. We returned to digging.

Once I proved to Jon that you couldn't see the gravesite from the road I convinced him to take a break, which we spent sitting in the car playing chess on his phone together. A passing car cut our game short. It was an SUV with those bright, white lights they have now and I worried it might illuminate something our cars' headlights hadn't. It slowed and Jon's body tensed, but the driver threw something out of the window and sped ahead. Whatever he'd thrown skittered across the yard, into the driveway. He repeated this at the next house. He was delivering newspapers.

We returned to the field and finished the grave, lowered Eileen into it, still wrapped in the tarp. I hate admitting that I wondered what she looked like underneath and whether I might still recognize her.

Jon must've seen her at some point and I'd have liked to share that burden, as if its weight could be finite. It could never be, but that night I found myself seeking comfort in all sorts of thoughts.

He said nothing as we filled the grave which made me keep thinking that I should. This was my only chance, but eulogies are for the living and if Jon didn't have to give one then I had to stay quiet. I'm unsuited for them anyways. Even good eulogies are disappointing as they're helpless to change the past.

Something deep in my shoulder clicked as we filled the grave. It was something that happened sometimes but usually painlessly. This time it hurt. I dreaded how I'd feel in the

morning, imagined the look my doctor would give me when I explained my injuries were from digging. I hadn't worked like this in years, even if Jon had done most of it.

Filling the grave went faster but by the time Jon spread snow over the dirt with his shovel, light was crawling in at the edges of the sky. A few birds flew past, perhaps returning early for spring.

We shook hands and I walked to my car certain I'd drive to the police station and confess. I could protect him by saying it was me. The police would believe an old, senile man had been fascinated by a woman like Eileen, smitten with his neighbor.

We drove off in opposite directions, him toward home and I toward town. When I reached the police station I circled the block twice before pulling into the parking lot.

A policeman was outside smoking by the little park with a sculpture garden and small, artificial lake. I told myself that if the policeman approached the car I'd tell him everything. My breath stopped when he looked up and our eyes met. He had the dull look of someone who was bored by everything he'd seen, but he walked over, stiff-legged. He was the kind of policeman kids knew they could outrun. He tapped the window.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

I just nodded.

"Your taillight is out, better get it fixed." He threw his cigarette into the snow and walked back into the station.

I kept telling myself to go in, but I couldn't confess without embroiling Jon. No one would believe a man in his seventies had buried Eileen alone. Any number of details could reveal Jon's

participation: a stray hair or fingerprint, receipts for the tarp and shovels, or his possible confession. How could I know if he'd let me take the blame? Plus, how would I have gotten the body without him or the funeral home knowing?

What I could've told them wasn't enough so I drove home and slept.

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In the days after, Jon regarded me with the sort of suspicion he usually reserved for complicated mid-games but the realtor signs went up and he sold the house in the spring.

Sometimes we still play online. Without the board between us the game is easier but less interesting. Maybe someday someone will find her, maybe a boy with a metal detector—beeping at one of the tarp's rings—or a farmer whose till catches on something, and I'll be guilty for the fear it drives into them, or maybe it will be so long from now that whoever finds it will see it as an archaeological discovery rather than evidence.

Jon moved to Vermont and when I worry over that winter I picture him in a cabin, building a fire for a new family, one I have no reason to believe in, but whose possible existence reassures me greatly.

END