

Flour

Have I ever felt cold? I think to myself. Did I ever experience the type of chill that gnaws at the bones for any remnants of warmth? I stand on the bank of Lake Michigan, my eyes searching for the frigid horizon. The sky and the lake met; one is indistinguishable from the other. The colors blend together in the soft snowfall of blue and white swirling together in a seemingly endless sky.

“Becca,” my husband calls. I turn to find him trying to tip our canoe over on the snowy bank. He might as well be a large grizzly grunting without success. The otter fur boots I fashioned for him are wrapped in leather strings. I can see the snow drip from the straps that hang loose. His hat is much too big for his head, but it keeps the heat from escaping with its hairy fluff. He is one big ball of fur that when looked on from a distance one can assume, he is another animal on the portage. I spin to face him.

“Yes,” I answer, blowing into my pelted hands.

“Help me lift this. We’ll have to travel across and hope the other side has thawed.”

I walk over to his side. My head reaches only to his hip—he is a large man and my deformity denies me the normalcy of height. My arms bend awkwardly as I curl my fingers around the edge, and with all the strength the cold leaves me I lift what I can. My hands slip over the rim but before the boat falls my husband catches the canoe and lifts the tip over his shoulder with the back end dragging in the snow. I had seen men lift canoes right over their heads with a single thrust, but those men were not traveling through the wilderness with naught but the skins they killed for a month.

“It was foolish to travel so late in the winter. Had I known the lake froze over I would’ve taken us a different path. I’m sorry, old girl.” He coughs and his breath comes out in puffs of air

that look like smoke. The scene reminds me of his beloved pipe: curved mouthpiece, engraved golden initials. It was his fathers. I regretfully left it behind with most of our other belongings.

We took what we could, but earlier into our travel the rapids had tipped the boat, and the current took all we possessed except a few weeks' worth of rations we found on the riverbed. Now that our supplies ran out, we had been living off of the occasional small rodent and the frosted snow. We use the canoe as shelter through the harsh nights and now that the iced bares the rest of the way we have to take on the elements with our feet planted on the ground. It is one of the few times I am grateful to be so small. Had I been a normal woman we never could fit together beneath the boat. My small legs struggle to keep up with his stride. He notices and slows down.

I raise my voice as the wind picks up, "How could you have known? It was going to be dangerous either way. With the fur traders passing us by, we would have starved."

I crave a fire, the warmth of the hearth back in our cabin. The trees line the opposite side of the bank and left a crispness in the air; a certain pureness that truly spoke to the great outdoors. I wrap my arms around myself unable to stop the shivering that escapes from my lips.

"We'll follow the St. Joseph River to the fort. It's a common trading post. We'll be able to gather supplies and settle there. It truly ain't too far from where we are." His tone matches my volume.

As the landscape of desert winter widens my husband's steps become slower and the crack of the snow beneath his feet cave deeper with each step as he pauses. The shadow of the day emerges, and his cough gets louder and longer with each hour; the great grizzly turning into a seal that for too long has been ashore.

Our village on the border of Canada seems a far, other-worldly place. The memory of green pastures and summer wildflowers graces my mind like a salve. Bright colors of red, purple and yellow fills the barren landscape before me as I look outside the cabin window. The dough bends to the will of my fingers as I knead it into submission. The bread will pair well with the fish stew cooking on the hearth. A light breeze sways the curtains of the window and the flour soars into the air. It makes me think of winter and how beautiful the snow will look in the trees. I hear the door swing open. My love is home. I smile and as I turn to greet him, I collapse into a world that doesn't grow flowers. I am back on the frozen lake with my husband gripping my arm.

"I think I lost you there for a moment. Are you well?" He said, still holding the canoe over his shoulder.

I push myself off the ice and give him my most reassuring smile. He nods in return and as I follow his lead, I realize what it was I experienced. It was not so bad as people say. I chuckle to myself as I recall the hallucination thinking of how innocent it seemed. But as days pass, the night's stay bitter and snow more unforgiving. I find myself wishing to stay in the illusion. I always wake before I see him, and I can never remember the smell of the gardens outside my window. I lose track of the days and I question if those flowers exist at all.

My feet drag across the river as the sun falls. I suppose it too feels the exhaustion of the trek. The night is as black as dusk and with only a few hours of it we huddle beneath the canoe. The wind howls outside as the ice scrapes the sides of the boat. I imagine fingers scratching on the wood begging to be let in. My husband tucks me into his pelt against his chest. My small frame jolts whenever he coughs which makes any form of sleep impossible. His arms encircle my waist as he rubs my back for warmth.

“What are you thinking?” he says with his nose close to mine. His brown beard has touches of red that whisker out unkempt with little icicles that speckle the ends. In the dim darkness, I cannot not escape his green eyes that question my thoughts. My positive demeanor has become a thin sheet of ice. I can feel the cracks beneath my feet where a deep pool of black water awaits me. I am just as transparent, and I know once he sees me, he would know I am only waiting to fall though.

“Nothing.” I say trying to avert my attention, but his closeness makes all deceit impossible.

“We may be not long married, but I know when you are troubled. Tell me,” His voice is deep and low but so gentle that it makes me sigh with its compassion.

“What are we doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what are we doing?” My frustration is evident in my tone. We left the comfort of our cabin for a dream in another town, another world as far as I am concerned. Do we truly believe that events would play out differently? That judgment and persecution will not follow us? I will always remain the dwarf, and he, the mad man who married one. We had to leave if we were to survive, I know. I understand the logic behind our decision but to think logically when my fingers are turning blue is difficult to consider. He furrows his brows at my words as if he cannot contemplate such an inquiry.

“I’d say we are taking shelter from the cold if you want me to be literal. But if I know you, and I think I do, then I’d say we are doing our best to find kindness where we can. There are not many places in this world that can look upon your or me in goodwill, but St Joseph’s is a start, don’t you think? Is there not one creature on God’s Earth that does not want kindness?”

“God,” I scoff, “Does he laugh at us?”

“All the time.” He says and I laugh as I watch his smile. It is a good smile, one that holds a small bit of boyhood charisma.

“You, though,” He brings his hand to my chin and runs a finger over my jaw. I can feel the sores that strew his skin, they are jagged and hard over my own. A strand of my brown hair falls over my forehead and he tucks it in behind my ear. My breath catches at the sight of his blackened fingers, but I remain silent. “I’d never laugh at, too afraid.” He chuckles and I roll my eyes. He holds me closer and kisses the tip of my nose as his lip quivers.

“This will be a new place, a new start for—” He cut himself off when the coughing fit takes him. His body racks in the deep baritone heaves he belts into the ground. I cannot tell if it is blood or snow, hardening on my cheek. The white sleet swirls around our heads then settles like a bed sheet on our faces. I see dark droplets on the ground and though I want to cry the brutal cold prevents me from doing so.

“Do you hear that?” I whisper. He raises his chin listening to the permafrost scream as it freezes over our shelter. “We’re not going to make it. It’s too far, and we haven’t eaten for days. We’ve been stopping to rest earlier and earlier.” He looks back at me with a sadness in his eyes. It beams like the sliver of sun that peaked through the curtains in our cabin. Oh, how I miss the cabin.

“That’s nonsense. We aren’t that far, I know it. Besides, there is still some strength in these arms yet,” he tightens his hold on me, “I’ll carry the canoe as far as I need to,” He speaks with such reverence as if reciting a prayer. I sigh and rest my head against his chest. “Do you remember what Ms. Jennings said when we left?”

I chuckle as I recall the large woman holding her broomstick on the porch of her small shack of a cabin.

“Devil be with you if that little spec be more than an oar for your traveling.” I say in her thick Canadian accent.

“The good Lord may be laughing at us, but the Devil ain’t nowhere in this cold.” His teeth chatter as he packs the snow that squeezes in on the side of the canoe. I close my eyes as I rub my hands together; hands that are as much use as a sheath missing its blade. I look up to find the frost on his face splitting in the lines of his smile.

“Dear, I can’t even help you carry the boat.” My foot makes its way between his knees. He bends his legs to cover them.

“Oh, I wouldn’t have your burden for the world.”

“How so?”

“Well, first off, there is my complaining. You’ve got to listen to my nonsense all day and when you’ve had enough of the racket you just go on listening,” he pauses as the wind blows louder, “Don’t think I haven’t noticed your witchcraft. You cast a spell on this land to make it as beautiful as heaven itself.”

I cannot not help the swell in my chest as his words soothe the ache in my joints, or is that the fire I feel? The corner of the canoe is ablaze in yellow and red. I can feel it or maybe the sun is rising again?

“According to the townsfolk, I’ve placed many spells. One of which was your decision to marry me.” I say as he leans in and kisses me. The colors brighten and rise to the roof of the canoe. Can he not see it?

“Hmm never release me.” He speaks against my lips. His touch brings a chill and my own mouth is absent of all feeling. I am so tired. I want to sleep to the crackling of wood burning. I can hear the spit and split of the bark and the smell of the smoke that escapes from the chimney. I wonder if I left the pot over the hearth. My eyes flutter and my head slides to the frosted ground. The snow stings my cheek, but I know the pillow is always cold when I first lay my head on it. It will warm up in time.

“Look at me,” He whispers, as his rigid fingers grasp my chin and force me to face him.

Where am I? I fell asleep, but for how long? Had the fire gone out? Is that why I can't feel my legs? My memory resolves itself and I let out a soft involuntary sob. Oh, the canoe. I am still in the canoe. I am not sure if I say it out loud and I try to compose myself, but my husband's eyes are dull. They drift as if we are still on the river. It is a look that is as helpless as a man who accepts fate as religion.

“This is not what I wanted for us. I want to live,” his head nods as the waves do. “God above knows I want to live, but the cold is harsh, and the ice is turning my skin black. This paltry boat is not where I thought to vanish from this world. I planned to die in your arms many years before you. I'm too young to die, and my anger is tempered into a soaring fire that, if it could, would melt the land clear into summer. I am so sorry, Becca, but I'm so cold. So cold.”

I can hear the moment where my heart breaks. It overpowers the blizzard and in that space of vivid pain I can feel the split as I bleed internally. He says nothing more as he stares beyond me, and like a fish he opens his lips to grasp at what little life remains between us. He is nothing but shivers, as if it is all he ever was. He is a body of jolts and shudders that cannot find balance. I place my cheek on his and hold him. I think I can do it, watch him crumble into

stillness. But what can I possibly know about witnessing death as I rise and fall on his struggling chest?

I count the seconds between each one; three breaths and fifteen seconds, six breaths and twenty-eight seconds. Until somewhere in the space of infinite time I count two breaths in thirty-five seconds then another at four minutes, that becomes thirty-seven minutes then I stop at seventy-two. The slight warmth of his body left, but I still cling to the corpse of glacial flesh. An empty vessel that unoccupied was little more than a bedroll of indescribable grief. My tears threaten to freeze my eyes shut so I gather my despair and force it into my fingers that hold him with an iron grip. I lament separating myself and stare at the ceiling of the boat. I can't breathe.

The sliver of sun sinks its way into the darkness as if I am underwater. I can smell the flowers. The colors mingle in the sunlight as if reflecting the petals. My hands rise and I push the inside of the canoe. The snow cracks at the edges where it froze to the ground. My teeth grind against each other as I place more pressure on my hands. My little arms barely reach the top and my back hurts from arching to meet it. My breath is shallow, and I know this is all I can do, but I need to see them. We cannot be left beneath the ice. I push again and then fall back as bright light soars around me. The sky is so blue. It is the same sky in my village. There is flour in the air. I must have left the window open again. I inhale the sweet breath of the blossoms. My chest hurts. I look beside me, and he is asleep. I always love watching him dream.