

The President's Day Storm of 1979 was considered the worst storm in 57 years to strike the Washington, D. C. area. Twenty inches of snow fell overnight.

Four deaths and 18 injuries were reported.
www.erh.noaa.gov/lwx/winter/DC-Winters.htm.

Tempete' de Neige '79

Katianna sat at a small table against the front window of the bistro. She watched heavy snowflakes hit its thin pane, cling for a moment and then melt into large, wet droplets. Her long and slender fingers ran up and down the edges of the pink linen napkin she'd yet to unfold, while a water goblet dripped condensation onto the pale green tablecloth, whose color, too, she supposed, was to remind the diners there would be a spring, no matter how severe the winter. Her wineglass sat empty except for the dark ring left by the Merlot.

Each time the waiter approached her table, she avoided his eyes by looking through the window and staring into the globe of the corner lamppost. Its rosy glow cast a sense of warmth over the chill swarming around the gray and white city landscape. The traffic on K Street moved under the sulfur cloud in a slow, steady stream, and it seemed to Katianna the motorists were now banded together in a well-rehearsed choreography.

The symphony tickets lay in a slim white envelope. *Ormandy!* was scribbled in thick black strokes across its length. A cut glass vase with three purple tulips sat on top of the

envelope. They were there when Katianna arrived. Marc had them delivered to the bistro as both a surprise and an intimation of the evening to come.

Marc was driving from Baltimore and was 45 minutes late. He'd called her that morning to say a need for the trip had just arisen, that he'd hurry, that he'd leave the tickets at their table. Katianna noticed an uneasiness in his voice and asked him about the trip's purpose. He was vague with his answer—something about property his family owned--and then he'd returned to how excited he was about their evening. His tone and manner confused Katianna more than they soothed her, and when she suggested they forgo the evening together, Marc was short with her, saying, "I've gone to great lengths for you, Katianna. Just be there."

It was not the first time he'd mentioned trips to Baltimore, and until today Katianna'd assumed their purpose had to do with his work at the hospital. For the first time, she questioned Marc's truthfulness with her, although she did not speak to him about it then. Instead she dismissed her thoughts as childish, somehow the result of her own limited experience of the world.

Katianna worried Marc would drive now as he usually did: reckless and fast. She was not sure he'd driven in snow before this winter, since he'd been in the States for less than a year and they'd known each other for just a few months and, in that time, he shared only small vignettes of ordinary life in Lebanon. Usually Katianna prodded him before he talked at all about his childhood home, and then he spoke mostly about his Italian grandmother who'd cared for him in Syria before his family immigrated to Lebanon. It was she who tattooed his wrist with a small cross so he'd not be mistaken for an Arab. This Katianna learned only after she noticed the blue mark on the inside of his wrist. They'd made love for the first time and lay naked in the light that filtered through her bedroom's blinds. Marc had wrapped tresses of her hair around his

fingers and teased her about the privileged life she'd led and how childlike her face became as she rubbed her finger over the tattoo as if she could erase it. "Oh, Katianna," he said, "you are not at all what your name suggests." And she laughed at his remark, recalling on other occasions how people expected her to be from somewhere exotic or to have traveled abroad or spoken other languages. "My mother chose the name on purpose," she said. "I suppose it represented for her the life she wanted for me."

What Marc offered freely and often, though, was news from his home as it now was: the ongoing bombings in Beirut, the safety of his brothers who hid in the nearby hills and the extent of damage to his father's many properties within the city itself. About his brothers, he said that one had become a contractor like their father and the other a lawyer, and that between the bombings and political turmoil both their careers had been destroyed. His father'd insisted Marc choose a career not so dependent on such things, and so he studied medicine. Marc's accounts frightened Katianna and challenged the news she heard or read, and so each time he talked about such things she waited quietly for him to finish and then changed the subject.

The waiter again approached Katianna's table and, without asking, placed a menu in front of her.

"Mademoiselle?" The waiter paused until Katianna looked up. "Monsieur Bardelli phoned just now. He wishes Mademoiselle to order without him. We are chilling a white burgundy, as he requested." The waiter spoke with a strong accent and Katianna strained to understand him. She wondered if he were one of the owner's relatives, perhaps an illegal, and what she'd do if there were a raid. Often such occurrences made the news, and a picture of patrons in one Georgetown bistro where she dined a couple weeks before had made the front page of *The Post*.

The waiter continued, "He expects to arrive sometime after 7:00."

"Thank you," she said.

Katianna glanced at her watch again. The gold numbers on its small face glistened in the dim light. The waiter bent down to the table and lit a candle and then held it near her arm. It was already 6:30. Katianna rubbed the crystal with her thumb. The watch was the only jewelry she'd kept from her marriage; she had stored the diamond wristband in the safety deposit box and replaced it with a thin black band she now slid forward on her wrist.

The menu was in French with only occasional English. There were no prices and Katianna wondered what to do. She'd become accustomed to Marc's ordering for her, and often he spoke French to the waiters—especially in the restaurants he preferred, or Arabic when they went to one of his cousins' restaurants. And though Katianna'd heard French in ballet class since she was a child and studied it in college, she hadn't developed the ear and tried to stay away from situations where she'd need to speak it. Now it seemed she'd entered a foreign land tucked inside the Beltway and all that she had ever hoped to avoid was thrust upon her.

Katianna looked into the face of the waiter. "Not yet," she said and turned her gaze back to the window. The snowflakes no longer melted as they hit the pane, but instead clustered in icy plaques and clung to the window's surface where they fell. The cars moved at such a slow pace no more than two or three went through the traffic light each time it changed.

When Katianna again looked down at the table, a full glass of red wine—this time, a Cabernet the waiter had chosen without asking—sat in front of her. The menu still lay on the table. Across from her a young couple waited to be seated. The woman sat on a long wooden bench and had removed her shoes. The man rubbed her stocking feet with his gloved hand. She kissed his cheek and whispered in his ear and pushed her breasts against his chest. Katianna

smiled at them, and the woman winked as if to suggest the two women were somehow *sympatiques*.

The waiter again approached her table. "Monsieur Bardelli has called. The phone is this way, Mademoiselle." He raised his arm toward the back of the bistro.

Katianna stood and started to follow and then turned to retrieve her purse. For a brief moment she couldn't find it, and she felt a wave of panic, but the purse had only fallen to the floor. She followed the waiter to the very back of the bistro and through a swinging door into a dark hallway. He pointed to a black wall phone. The cord dangled and the headset touched the floor. The waiter bent down and handed Katianna the phone.

"Marc," she said. "Marc, I'm so glad to...Marc. Marc, are you there?" There was no answer.

Katianna looked toward the waiter, but he was gone. Again, she said, "Marc. Marc, are you there?" Still, there was no answer.

She held the phone to her chest and opened her purse. Somewhere she'd slipped a paper with Marc's pager number. The only light in the hallway was several feet away, and as she moved toward it, she let go of the headset. As it hit the floor, another waiter came through the door, scowled and placed it on its cradle. In the light she could see the number tucked in a side pocket of her wallet.

She dialed the pager's number, but there was no response. She thought she'd try again, but first, she dialed her home. The sitter answered.

"Is everything all right?" Katianna asked.

"Yes. Marlina is asleep. I'm watching the news."

"Marc is late. He tried to call me, but something happened to the connection."

“The weatherman is telling people to stay inside,” the sitter said.

“If I’m past midnight, can you stay over?”

“Oh, yes. I was going to ask you anyway. Or leave you a note. The blue room?”

“Yes. Yes. But I’m not sure of the number here,” Katianna answered. She looked around as she spoke, as if she expected someone she knew to come into the darkness with her. “I want you to be able to reach me. In case something goes wrong.”

“Do you want to call me back with the number when you have it?”

“Yes, but perhaps I should call a taxi. If Marc doesn’t call back, I will. But then I’m sure he’ll be here.”

“We’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

“I’ve never stayed away from her all night,” Katianna said, but the sitter had already hung up.

Katianna dialed Marc’s pager again, but still there was no response. She went back through the swinging door into the soft lights and the aromatic warmth of the long room. A small band had begun their set and the room was brimming with music and laughter. The couple waiting to be seated now sat at the table next to hers. The waiter was placing an ice bucket between the tables. He nodded to Katianna, as if to say the wine was for her, and then unwrapped and placed the bottle in the ice, but he’d left her table and disappeared before she could make her way to the front of the bistro.

She waited several minutes before he reappeared.

“What is the telephone number here?” she asked.

“The one for the hallway?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not sure. Let me ask the *maitre d’*.”

Katianna could see the *maitre d’* raise his hands in the air. Then he looked toward her and shrugged.

The waiter returned. “It’s the storm, Mademoiselle. We’re so sorry. It’s taken out the lines, so they say.” He nodded toward a man and woman who sat at the bar, brushing snow from their hair and coats.

Katianna again looked toward the window beside her table. Its surface was nearly covered in snow and only a thin sheaf of light seeped through. The canvas awning above the entrance flapped against the building and she could hear the wind whistle as it whipped around the corner and through the narrow space that separated it from the next building. An occasional car’s headlights formed a twin beacon that produced a momentary break in the backdrop and then disappeared. She picked up the envelope containing the symphony tickets and turned it over several times. Then she opened the envelope and took them out. Rachmaninoff and Ormandy. The Philadelphia Symphony. A note from Marc. She slid the note into her purse without reading it and glanced at her watch: 7:15. Curtain was at 8:00.

“*Montrachet '77*, Mademoiselle.” The waiter stood by her table. “Very young, but ready. Please. Do the honors.” He removed the bottle from the ice and took out the cork with a few quick moves and offered it to her. She smiled as though she knew what to notice. The waiter then poured a small amount in a chilled wineglass and handed it to her. She sipped it and tried to imagine what she should say.

“This is a special night, yes?” he half-asked. “Such a wine does not get ordered every day.”

Katianna nodded, not knowing whether he expected an answer to his question or was still waiting for her to approve the wine.

The waiter filled her glass and smiled. “You will order now?”

Katianna didn't answer at first. Instead she glanced at the couple and then back to the waiter. Then she turned to the woman and asked, “Will you join me?”

“May we?” the woman asked her companion.

“If you like,” he replied. His eyebrows raised and a furrow formed along the center of his forehead. Katianna was struck by how he reminded her of Marc when he became irritated and she wished she'd not made the offer.

“Oh, thank you,” she said to Katianna. “We were on the way to see Truffaut—Francois, himself. At the Kennedy. He's here, you know.”

“Yes. We, I mean Marc and I—I'm waiting for him now—we saw him. Just last week.”

“Oh, you are so lucky. Isn't she?” The woman turned again to her companion. He shrugged and tapped his fingers against his fork and continued to look toward the musicians.

“It's canceled, you know. The Kennedy Center. Everything is closing,” she said to Katianna and then turned to her companion. “I'm so sad,” she said to him, pretending to pout by pressing her lips forward. Katianna could see the woman's leg move up to her companion's lap. It was long and lean and muscular. The leg of a dancer, she imagined.

The waiter returned with two more chilled glasses and set them on the couple's table. He then lifted the menu and gestured to Katianna, as if to ask if she were ready. She shook her head from side to side and waved her hand for him to take the menu away. Then she stood and moved the ice bucket a few inches toward the couple's table. She put on her long velvet coat and

wrapped the thin silk evening scarf around her head. Without a word she smiled at the woman and walked out the bistro's front door.

The wind whistled around the corner and the snow fell with such force it stung Katianna's face. Her coat billowed to her waist and her scarf fell from her hair and flew about her shoulders. She struggled to walk as far as the corner lamppost and then held out her bare hand for a taxi. Only her feet were protected with boots meant for such weather, yet she could feel the cold gathering around her toes. Her hands were already so chilled they were beginning to lose feeling.

She waited no more than five or six minutes and then the familiar yellow of a district cab pulled to the curb. The driver did not leave his seat to come around to help her and she found his inaction somehow reassuring.

"Where to, Miss?"

"Rosslyn."

"Think we can still do that," he said, as the taxi lurched forward and onto the street.

"How far after that?"

"Oh, just to there."

"One of them high rises?"

"Yes. Just after the subway entrance."

"Nice. You live there?"

"Yes," Katianna answered.

The wind blew across the width of M Street and drifts formed along the curbs. Snow stuck to the sides of streetlights so they emitted only long narrow ellipses, and it seemed to Katianna that she was traveling through a dimly lighted tunnel instead of the familiar street she

traveled to and from work. The taxi was at the corner of Wisconsin before she noticed there were no other cars.

At the base of Key Bridge, the driver whistled as if he'd seen a beautiful woman. "This could be dicey," he warned. "It's ice under all that snow, you know. Bound to be awful slick up there, but we'll give her a try." And then almost as though he were making a retraction, he added, "Don't you worry none, Missy. I've seen worse."

Katianna clutched the door grip and pushed the balls of her feet into the floor. She felt for a seatbelt, although she knew there was none. The taxi made the turn onto the bridge without sliding and its wheels fell into a rut that brought them to the top of the incline. Then it began to skid with its right front wheel leading. Ahead of them and to the left was a stopped car. It was a light color, perhaps silver or gray, and was barely visible. The driver's door was wide open and in their path.

As they came within inches of the door, the taxi driver whistled again. "Can you believe it? Only in Washington. An abandoned Ferrari in the middle of the Potomac."

Yes, Katianna thought, she *could* believe it. Before Marc, maybe not. But now, *yes*.

She turned around in her seat and looked back into the District. A pink haze of sulfur formed a halo over the city that was barely visible through the snow. This was the scene she viewed from her apartment on the western side of the Potomac, and she used to believe there was no difference between it and the country that surrounded it. At that moment she recalled a remark Marc made the night she met him. He'd been talking to a tall and loud woman who mentioned she was from Chicago and before she could say more, he'd interrupted her. "Ah," he said. "Like Cleveland? Is it not true in the states there is Washington and New York, and everything else is Cleveland?" The woman walked away from him and Katianna'd thought him

arrogant and rude. Yet, he'd captured her attention and she could not help herself when he'd introduced himself and then asked her out.

Katianna turned toward the front of the taxi where she could see the faint outline of the buildings ahead. Her cold hands were recovering feeling and she rubbed them briskly by cold and then shoved them into her coat pockets. She felt the note from Marc against her hand. She started to pull it out, but instead she wrapped her fingers around it and crumpled it into a small ball. As the taxi pulled in front of her building, she removed her hands from her pockets and dropped the wadded note on the taxi floor. She handed the driver a bill much larger than necessary and stepped onto the clear pavement at her front door, where the bellman kept guard.

What a storm, she thought. What a whirlwind: this relationship with Marc. It was ever so easy for one to get caught up in such energy, she mused. And, it was ever so dangerous for someone such as herself.

Again, she gazed at the pink hue of the city's thick haze. "Such seduction," she said aloud.

