

## Stranger in the Snow

It was as though no color other than white existed. The world was blinding after the snowstorm last night. Laura saw the clean, unblemished snow as the perfect chance to go to the park and take photographs for her upcoming winter catalogue. She stepped outside her front door into a knee-deep snowdrift, her pants instantly moist. She waded through the pearly frozen tundra until she reached the freshly plowed street. Powder was still falling lightly from the white sky.

At the park across the street from Laura's tiny, snowed in house, the silence was pleasantly loud. She shot for a few minutes with her new Nikon F6. She wouldn't let her discomfort get in the way of this beautiful setting, even if the boots her husband got her for Christmas last month were soaked through to her toes. No one other than a few out of place birds was in the park today. Everyone was probably in their cozy homes with blankets and hot chocolate, including her husband and kids. Laura would give them the cold snow to hold onto in magazine pages. They wouldn't have to step foot in the wet, white world.

She was just getting set up for a shot of a blue jay on a snow dusted branch when she felt a tap through the many layers on her shoulder. She whipped around, letting the camera shoot several times at nothingness.

"Oh, I didn't mean to startle you." A man bundled up in a gray coat stood over where she knelt.

"It's okay. I just haven't seen anyone out today." She laughed.

"I only wondered how I might get into town and where something would be open?"

“Well, town is just up the road a ways. I’m not sure what would be open; we often shut down for even a light snow. Where do you come from?” She put the camera back in its bag. Her fingers were too frozen to shoot anymore.

“I was just visiting some family out in East Hampton and my car broke down here in the storm. Islip right? I just got off the highway as quickly as I could.”

Laura brushed the melting snow off her ice-capped knees. “Yup, where are you trying to get to?”

“Larchmont in Westchester. Still a ways.”

“Oh, wow, not such a good day for traveling, huh?” Laura laughed, nervously.

He tightened his scarf around his neck. “No, I probably should have stayed out east but I didn't think there would be so much snow. I don't know how I'm going to get AAA on the phone again, mine's dead.” Laura felt him looking at her expectantly. Why did she have to be the only person out here today? She sighed.

“Well, I live just across the street, you can come use the phone if you'd like.”

“That's very nice of you.” He bowed his head and showed a mouth of crooked teeth. “I'm Ben.”

“Laura,” she responded, wading back through the footprints she created earlier.

Back at the house, Laura's children were lying on the living room floor in their pajamas, eating cereal. An episode of SpongeBob blared from the television.

“Kids! Turn that down!” she yelled before shutting the front door. Wind whipped drifts of snow into the foyer. The floor had already grown wet from her boots that seemed to be melting.

“I’m sorry, Ben, please let me take your coat.” Laura hung all of their cold weather attire on an overcrowded coat rack of hats, scarves, mittens and jackets. She showed him to the kitchen where her oblivious husband was sitting at the table, engrossed in the sports section.

“Honey, this is Ben. His car broke down and he needs to use the phone.”

Her husband glanced up from the folded paper in his hand. “Oh, hi, I’m Stephen.” He shook Ben’s hand and kept his eyes on Laura.

“Can I get you some coffee, Ben?” Laura asked, pouring water into the coffee pot.

“That’d be great, thank you. I just like it black.” Ben smiled his crooked teeth and sat down in the chair across from Stephen.

“So, where do you hail from Ben?” Stephen asked, setting the paper down.

“Well, I was visiting some family out east and my car broke down here on the way back to Westchester. Moved there a few years back.”

“Ah, well, great place to get stuck, huh?” Stephen laughed.

“Hey, the snow is probably worse up at home, who knows if I’ll ever make it back.” Ben laughed along with him.

Laura stood in front of the coffee pot that had started trickling out brown liquid as she watched their uncomfortable laughter subside. Silence swallowed the

kitchen. Nothing but the steady drip of caffeine and distant sounds of the nasal cartoon character filled the background.

Stephen glanced over at her as he fiddled with the edges of the paper.

“So, why travel today?” Stephen asked, looking back toward Ben.

“Big meeting tomorrow,” he answered.

Stephen nodded, letting silence creep up again.

“Here you are,” Laura said, relieved to set a hot cup of coffee down in front of Ben. Steam escaped the face of the mug in ghostly swirls.

“Thank you,” Ben replied, wrapping his hands around the mug.

Laura noticed cuts and white scars on his burly hands. She looked at Stephen and saw that he was looking at Ben’s hands also. They exchanged nervous glances. Laura suddenly began suspecting the worst. Had she let a dangerous man into her house and near her SpongeBob watching kids? Would he hurt them? Her pulse quickened as fear swam through her.

“Laura, could I talk to you for a moment?” Stephen stood from his chair and took her arm.

“Um, here’s the phone Ben, just a moment please.” She set the cordless phone down in front of his scarred hands.

Stephen didn't let go of her arm until they were in the hallway. He still had Ben in his sight from where he stood.

“Why’d you bring this guy here?” he whispered loud enough to show he was angry but quiet enough so that Ben could not hear him.

“He was wandering in the snow drifts, lost. They won’t come for his car. No where in town will be open.”

“Did you see the car?” Stephen asked with urgency, peering over her shoulder, his eyes on Ben.

Laura exhaled. She knew she shouldn't have brought him to their home but it was freezing outside, and she couldn't be so rude to turn someone in need away. She was sure anyone else would have done the same thing, wouldn't they?

“Look, I think we need to ask him to leave.” Stephen stared at her sternly.

“Stephen, I have already invited him in. Let’s just call AAA and be cautious. He really does seem harmless.”

“Fine, I hope you’re right,” he dropped to a lower whisper. “A snowstorm seems like the perfect opportunity for a stranger to play the helpless victim and then kill your whole family... just so you know.” She found it comical that he wasn't joking and she couldn't help but laugh. He was always suspecting the worst in people.

“Sounds more like you’re writing a novel than living in the real world.”

“These things happen in the real world, Laura.”

She turned around to see Ben taking a sip of his coffee. “Let’s get back to him, we’re being rude.”

“So, any luck with AAA, Ben?” Stephen asked as he walked back to his chair in the kitchen.

“No,” he sighed. “Couldn't even get an answer. I guess I'll just have to keep trying.”

“Yeah, today is a tough one, we'll get ahold of them eventually.” Stephen took a sip of his own coffee. “So, you say you have family out east, what part?”

“East Hampton, you ever been?”

“You don't say. I'm originally from Amagansett. Right in East Hampton itself.” He laughed. “Small world, isn't it?”

“And getting smaller.” Ben smiled. There was something unusual about his smile. Laura watched him.

“Hey, if you guys don't mind I think I should get started developing these photos upstairs. I'm on deadline and I really need to make sure there's enough to work with.” Laura was already moving toward the foyer where her camera bag sat on a chair.

She felt Stephen's eyes on her back.

“Sure,” he said with subtle anger. “We'll keep calling AAA.”

“Kids, please turn that down. I don't want to have to ask again.” She walked through the living room to the stairs. Her son picked up the remote and pressed a button, his and his sister's eyes glued to the TV all the while.

Laura headed up to her darkroom, feeling guilty leaving Stephen alone with Ben but she had to focus on her photos. She hoped that she wouldn't have to re-do them. She shivered at the thought of going back out into the flurry.

She settled her camera down on the table and mindlessly prepared all of her materials. She had gone through the process countless times. It was never the part that she enjoyed about her job. She enjoyed taking the photos, giving immortality to what only she saw through the lens that day.

She let her developing photos soak. She thought about Stephen and Ben downstairs. She hoped that they were able to get AAA on the phone so that they could have some relief today and not have to worry about who this guy was. She thought the scars on his hands were probably just from work. They never did ask him what he did for a living.

She sat for a half hour, thinking of everything that could go wrong while she was up here. She didn't consider herself a worrier by any means but Stephen had a way of getting inside her head. He was filled with fear and worst-case scenarios. It couldn't just be that the man was stranded in the snow; it had to be that the man was waiting for an unsuspecting woman to feel sympathy before murdering her whole family. She cringed as she realized the thoughts that were wandering through her brain.

She turned her mind back to the prints that were slowly gaining life. Then, she realized something strange. She leaned closer to one photo she had been staring at. Behind one of the trees was a man. As the photo fully came alive, she realized that man was Ben.

She carefully began taking the photos out and hanging them on the line. Each photo that she did this with had Ben somewhere in the background. First, he was behind that snow draped tree. Then, he was sitting on a bench across the snow filled

park. He was standing by the horse monument in the park's center. He was walking through a distant trail. He was in every single one of them.

Laura's heart felt like a Ping-Pong ball within the confines of her chest. Her breathing quickened. She slowly backed away from the photos, letting Ben surround her. Was it possible that she wasn't paying attention and just didn't see him? But, she was focusing the camera in every direction. The photos were yards apart. She tried to stay calm, to tell herself that everything was fine. She stood and cautiously opened the door. She walked back down the stairs.

When she reached the living room she saw that the TV was off and her kids were no longer there. She walked through to the kitchen to see Stephen still sitting at the table, but no Ben.

"Where are the kids?"

Stephen looked up, surprised to see her. "Their room with the PlayStation."

"Did AAA come?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah, just a few minutes ago actually."

She sighed with relief. "Thank God, you will never guess what I just found in my photos. Really creeped me out."

Stephen looked at her, confused, waiting for her to go on when a loud boom sounded outside the front door. They both flinched.

Stephen stood up and walked into the foyer. Laura followed closely behind. He opened the door, slowly. Wind whipped snow inside like a frozen fire.



Laura peered around his shoulder and they both saw the same thing—nothing. Icy powder sprayed her face and she shut her eyes as Stephen pushed against the pressure of the wind, locking the door.

“Must have just been snow falling off the roof.” He shrugged; wiping flakes off his face. “So what happened with the pictures?” He seemed eager.

“It was so strange, Ben is in every one of them.” She was unable to express her worry properly.

“What do you mean? Like you took pictures of him before inviting him over?” Stephen asked.

“No, I didn't know he was there.” She furrowed her brow together, a headache sat in her skull like a third eye. “Let me show you.”

They walked upstairs together and down the hall to her dark room. For once, she felt that she was the panicky one in the relationship. She dreaded seeing the photos again and trying to figure out what had happened. Nothing made sense.

She prolonged the turning of the doorknob until they finally had to step inside.

Stephen walked over to the photos hanging on the farthest line. The red of the room gave him a bloody glow. He took a photo between his fingers. White snow now turned red coated the thick tree branches. He studied it then turned around to meet Laura's eyes.

“Which one's have Ben in them? I still don't see what you mean.” He looked puzzled.

She frowned and walked over to where he stood, the glossy paper clasped between his fingers. She examined every photo on the line again. Ben wasn't in any of them.

She felt Stephen watching her as she slowly made her way around all of her beautiful hanging photos. They came out perfectly. They were in focus. The mounds of snow looked cold and fluffy against the bodies of trees. Birds posed with dust on their small heads as if they were waiting for their photo to be taken. And there was no Ben.

Laura turned around to meet Stephen's eyes. He was anticipating her response.

"That's really strange." She shrugged.

Stephen looked worried as the red glow danced around his jaw. His eyes bloodshot with lamplight.

"Let's go check on the kids," he said, slowly, still analyzing his wife.

They made their way back downstairs. Laura confused and tired and her headache screaming inside her brain.

Stephen tapped on their bedroom door and when no one said anything he opened it, cautiously.

Their daughter and son were sitting on the ground in their pajamas with PlayStation controllers in their small hands. Eyes glued to the screen.

"Everything okay?" Stephen asked.

They didn't peel their eyes away from the TV. Their son furiously clicked away at his controller and jerked his arms around as if he were actually playing the sport. Stephen shut the door.

“Maybe you should go lay down,” he offered. Laura silently nodded and walked down the hall to their bedroom. She rested on her side against the mattress, staring out the frosted window. She tried to clear her head, recognizing that she and Stephen had both overreacted. He wasn't in her pictures. He was simply a stranger in the snow. And now he was gone.

Laura's eyes began to slowly blink shut. Snowflakes flurried down outside between the opening and closing of her tired eyelids. An icicle broke off the roof and fell into the whiteness below.