

Cold

Jean drove with the radio blaring and the heater on full blast, her wavy red hair stuffed under a blue knit stocking hat. She could still feel the bite of the cold steering wheel through her matching gloves. “Be advised folks, we are under a severe cold warning until noon tomorrow,” the announcer said. “Temperatures could dive into the negative forties tonight. Records show this is the coldest day in winter since 1996. It’s 5 pm and the current temp is twenty-five below zero and dropping. Please get home and stay inside if you can, folks.”

“No kidding,” Jean said aloud, flexing her numbed fingers.

“You’re listening to KQ102. Stay tuned, more great music on the way.” After switching through four or five stations and hearing nothing but advertisements and news, she switched the radio off and drove in silence. A few minutes later the check engine light came on.

“No. Oh no! You did not just die on me!” She moaned as the car coughed and sputtered. “Shit!” Jean pulled over to the side of the road. She turned the key in the ignition again only to hear the engine rr-rr-rrr in protest before dying entirely. “Dammit!” Jean cried. *I told Gary we had to get this fixed*, she thought. *I told him!* An exasperated sigh escaped her lips as she thumped the steering wheel with a gloved hand. She blamed herself for thinking her husband would even fix the car in the first place. She grabbed her cell phone from her coat pocket and dialed home. Jean waited until she got the answering machine then hung up. *I’ll call his cell.* The phone beeped, warning low battery. He answered on the fifth ring.

“Yeah? What?”

“Gary. I need you to come get me. I’m broke down less than two miles out.”

Silence.

“Gary?”

“What?” came the sharp reply.

“It's cold. I'll freeze to death. I need you.”

“Why don't you get your *boyfriend* to drive you home?” he snarled.

“Who?” Jean could tell he'd been drinking.

“That Todd guy. From the diner. Why don't you get *him* to drive you home?”

Jean sighed. They had been through this many times before—ever since he had seen them together some months ago. “Gary,” she said slowly, trying to stay calm, “You know Todd and I are just friends. We work together, remember?”

“You want to fuck him don't you?”

“Gary. I don't have time for this. Could you please come get me?”

Silence.

“Gary?”

“Get yourself home, Bitch. I'm busy.” Click.

“Asshole!” she screamed at the phone before throwing it down on the seat. She took a few deep breaths, trying to compose herself. Then she picked up her cell again. She listened to the first ring. Beep. Ring. Beep.

“Hello?”

“Mom? Hey, I need a huge favor. “

“Oh hi Honey. How are you?”

”Mom, listen, I need--” The phone died before she could say another word. “Shit!” Jean angrily threw the phone back on the seat. She covered her face in her hands and cried for several

minutes before resting her forehead on the steering wheel. She sat hunched over for some time, cursing herself for being so stupid. Why hadn't she just called her mother in the first place? If Jean had, she'd be on her way to pick her up right now. But she had put her faith in Gary, and he had let her down, again.

They had met at Jo's, the town bar. She'd sat in her usual spot at the end of the bar, unwinding after a long shift at the diner. Just another Friday night—except for the man in the back corner. She had never seen *him* before. He was good looking in a gruff, dogged kind of way. Dark hair and mysterious eyes. Where did he come from? She was still mulling the question over when he sat down beside her.

“Marry me,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

“Too direct?”

“I don't even know you.” Jean blushed.

“Too forward?”

“You think?” She rolled her eyes and fidgeted in her chair. *Just go away, creep.*

“Well, what is it going to take to at least get your name?” He asked. He grinned but his cheeks and ears had turned a deep shade of red.

Jean laughed. She couldn't help herself. He looked so wounded. It was cute.

“Usually, one buys me a drink, and I'll have a beer, thanks.”

“Ah, a real woman. I like that,” he said, ordering two beers.

Jean had never been called that before. “Actually,” she continued, “most gals drink beer

in this town. You must not be from around here.”

“From the city, actually. Needed a change of scenery.”

“So you decided to come to a little town up north in the middle of nowhere?”

“Yep.”

What was this guy's deal? He was so forward, so cocky, but there was some shyness, some insecurity under the surface, that she found strangely attractive.

“I never did get your name,” he added, interrupting Jean’s thoughts.

“Oh. Uh, Jean.”

“Hi, uh, Jean. I'm uh, Gary.” They both laughed. Jean's cheeks burned.

“So...Gary. Why here?”

“I’ve heard the fishing is great.”

“Cut the crap,” Jean laughed, eyeing him skeptically. “Why are you really here?”

“Okay you got me. Honestly?”

“Yeah, out with it.”

“Well, I got laid off from my job, so I decided, the hell with it. I'm going to start over. Just get in the car and drive, see where I end up.” His dark eyes held hers.

“And fate led you here?” Jean joked, her heart racing slightly.

“Well, kind of, actually.” Gary studied his beer.

“Okay?” Jean waited for an explanation.

Gary sighed, “I got a flat. I had to walk three miles. This was the first place I found.

Jean snickered. “I guess that is fate.”

Maybe it was the beer, but she was warming up to him. He wasn’t the cocky

smooth-talker he pretended to be. He appeared to be just an average, down-on-his-luck kind of guy.

They talked, sipping beer and eating peanuts from the bar until last call. It wasn't until after she married Gary, four months later, that she found out appearances could be deceiving. Even dangerous.

Jean finally lifted her head from the steering wheel and sat up. She shivered, suddenly feeling the cold. *What now?* It was a mile and a half to home. It didn't sound like much. In summer it was nothing, but winter was different, it was dark, and the temperature was dropping rapidly. After a few more minutes of waiting, with no sign of anyone on the road, she zipped her coat up tight, braced herself for the cold, and stepped out of the car.

When Gary began to change she didn't think much of it. The first thing she noticed was his temper. When something broke in the house he quickly became annoyed, muttering profanities under his breath. Seconds later that annoyance would turn into a full-blown outburst.

Jean had come home from work one evening to find Gary on his knees, tinkering with the dishwasher. She could tell by the way he knocked things about that he was in one of his moods. She had tried to comfort him. "Gare, honey, why don't we just call someone to fix whatever it is?"

"No. I can get the damn thing."

"There's no shame in calling someone, Gare. Save yourself the hassle."

"You think I can't fix a damn dishwasher? What kind of man do you take me for?"

“I didn't mean it like that.” Jean was surprised how easily he took offense.

“Then how did you mean it?” Gary demanded, his voice rising.

“All I'm saying is I know how frustrated you get with these things and it'd be less stressful if you just let someone else take care of it.”

“I can fix the fucking dishwasher, okay?”

Jean cringed. “Alright.” She watched him from the doorway.

“I can't work with you looming over me like that,” he snapped.

Jean laughed nervously, “Looming? I'm not *looming*. I'm all the way over here.”

“You're all up in my space. It's fucking annoying. Go away.”

His words stung. “You have some nerve, Gary.” Jean stomped out of the kitchen and into their bedroom, slamming the door behind her. She turned on the lamp by the bed and stripped down to her undies. She crawled under the blankets and switched on the TV. Wisps of her husband's curses still drifted in from the kitchen. With a sigh Jean grabbed the remote and turned up the volume. Hours later Gary came in and stood by the side of the bed.

“Hey.”

Jean shrugged, her eyes glued to the screen.

“I'm sorry.”

“You should be. Where do you get off talking to me that way?” Jean's eyes never left the TV.

“I know. I'm an ass. Look, I'm sorry.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

“Can you at least look at me?”

Jean sighed and looked up at him.

“I love you, Baby-Doll, I'm sorry,” he repeated.

“You can be a real jerk sometimes,” Jean said, softening.

“I know.” He bent down to kiss her but she rolled away.

“It doesn't mean I'm not still mad at you.”

“Let me make it up to you.” Gary shook her playfully.

“No.” Jean pulled the covers up over her head.

“You want to play it that way?” He moved to the foot of the bed and dove under the covers. She stifled a giggle as he burrowed his way toward her, nuzzling her feet, inching his way up her legs, stomach, breasts, with his nose. When he met her mouth, he paused.

“Well,” she teased, “what are you waiting for?” Without waiting for him to reply she pulled him down on top of her.

Jean gasped as a strong gust of wind assaulted her, taking the memory with it. She was still a good mile out and already her feet had gone numb and her toes felt like frozen sausages. She shivered despite her layers. Frowning, she stopped to pull her hat farther down her head and trudged on.

The first time Gary hit her was so unexpected she wondered if it had really happened. Jean had grown used to him swearing at her when things didn't go right. It had become routine. He'd yell. She'd cry. They'd make up in the usual way.

Jean had come home late one night to find him standing against the refrigerator, beer in

hand, a dark look on his face. She was surprised to see him there; it had been months since he'd waited up for her. When they were first married he used to greet her with a kiss and make her coffee and ask about her day. Those things had become a rarity, then they stopped all together. That night Gary greeted her with an icy glare.

“Tough day?” she kicked off her shoes and sat down at the table.

He shrugged and took a long drink. “I saw you today,” he said.

“Yeah? Where?”

“Outside the diner.” He belched.

“Oh, yeah. I must have been on my break. What was I doing?”

“Talking.”

“To who?”

“A guy. You were laughing.”

“Yeah, that was Todd. You know Todd, don't you? ”

“That little shit you work with? What did this Todd say that was so funny?” he approached the table. His eyes were dark and cold.

“Honestly, I don't remember.”

“You like this Todd guy?”

“He's just a friend, Sweetie. Don't tell me you're jealous?” Jean laughed.

“It's not funny!” He slammed his fist on the table.

Jean's smile faded. “Honey,” she said, standing to hug him, “We're just co-workers. There's nothing to be upset about.”

He pushed her away. “He wants to get in your pants. Maybe you'd like that?”

Jean gasped. “What? This is ridiculous. I told you we just work together.”

“Yeah. Right.”

“Gary, get over yourself. You're being stupid.” The sentence was punctuated by a loud hard slap across Jean's cheek. She stumbled backward, stunned.

“Don't you ever talk to me that way, Bitch.”

“I'm sorry,” she muttered. She spent the rest of the night crying at the kitchen table, trying to make sense of what had happened. He never even apologized. When he hit her again a week later she called her mom.

“What did you say to set him off?” her mother said. “Nothing, Mom.” Jean was starting to regret calling her. “I just said he was being ridiculous. He was acting like a jealous teenager.”

“Jealous? Of what?”

“He thinks there's something going on with me and this guy Todd at work.”

“Is there?”

“What do you think, Mom!” Jean gasped. “Of course not.”

“Well you must have done something to make him think otherwise.”

“Thanks for your support, Mom. Soo glad I called.” Jean snapped.

“Well, Honey. I'm just trying to look out for you.”

You can't even look out for yourself, Mom. Jean thought bitterly as she struggled along the snowy road. Her mother had met a man who used to push her down stairs and kick her unconscious. She had self-prescribed with alcohol. Take five shots of Jäger and wait till morning. She stopped when she found out she was pregnant. He left her when she told him.

How foolish Jean had been to think her broken mother could help her. She angrily

waved her gloved through the air, as if doing so could erase the memory. Jean hated herself. She was becoming her mother. She was foolish for thinking Gary was different. For taking her mother's advice against her own better judgement. Foolish for thinking things would turn out okay.

She threatened to leave many times. Why hadn't she? Maybe she thought she could change him. It might have had something to do with the fact that she was thirty-five and chances were slim of finding another man in this town. No, she knew the real reason. She stayed because she loved him.

And there had been times she was sure he loved her too. Surprise dinners, camping under the stars, late nights eating pizza and playing cards, dancing to the radio, and the long hours of lovemaking.

That first week the newlyweds had blessed every room in the house not to mention the kitchen table, the couch, the garage, the car, and the boat. Now, as Jean trudged bitterly along that cold, snowy road, all she could think about was how much she hated him. Gary's words still echoed in her mind: *Get yourself home bitch.*

"He doesn't even care if I freeze to death out here." She stifled a sob and angrily kicked a clump of ice. She watched it skip then stop a few feet ahead. She had made it as far as the lake. If she cut across it she could be home in 20 minutes! Jean thought for a moment, then she set off across the ice.

Jean and Gary kept a fish house with a bunk bed, a heater, and a radio. The shack was special to her, not because they had spent many frigid nights there finding creative ways to keep

each other warm, but because they had built it together. When he decided to stay up north, Gary had taken up building fish houses as a sort of hobby. He made good money selling them in addition to his job at the garage. Ice fishing in this Northern Minnesota town was as big a sport as any other. People even held contests. Every January the frozen lake would be littered with little houses, fishermen perched over their drilled holes, waiting for the big one that would win them a brand new Ford truck.

Jean and Gary used to fish together until one day Gary said he'd rather go alone. These days, he spent most of his time there. He stayed out all day, fishing and drinking. Sometimes he wouldn't come back for days at a time.

Once, Jean had gone to take him some sandwiches. Really, that was just an excuse to drop in and check on him. She arrived at the fish house and opened the door. The smell of fish, alcohol and sweat invaded her senses. Beyond the stench and empty beer bottles was Gary, his back turned, slouching in his chair.

“Gare?”

“What are you doing here?” he said, turning around.

“I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Can't a guy get any god damn time alone?”

“But—I just wanted to see you,” Jean said, “I brought you lunch. See?” She held up a brown paper bag.

“Leave it and go.” Gary turned back to his hole in the ice.

“What?”

“I said get out.”

“What is wrong with you?” A tear squeezed itself from the corner of Jean's eye, slowly coursing down her cheek to her chin. Gary said nothing. She angrily wiped the tear away with the sleeve of her coat. “Fine, Gare. You want your lunch?” She stomped over to him, ripped open the bag, and threw the sandwiches into the hole.

“You bitch!” Gary leapt out of his chair. Jean turned to run. He caught her just outside the door. Keeping a firm hold on her hair, he smashed her face hard into the snow. When Gary tired and the snow was painted red from Jean's raw, bloody nose, he stood up and went back inside. No one had seen or heard the incident, though there were many houses on the lake that day. Jean had sobbed all the way home.

The lake was silent except for the sound of Jean's boots as she shuffled through the snow. She walked determinedly, weaving her way along the dark clusters of fish houses, all abandoned for the night. She just wanted to forget about this horrible night, this horrible everything. She would get home and thaw out in the shower. Then things were going to change. She meant it this time.

Jean walked a ways, then stopped. What was that faint light in the distance? It came from one of the fish houses. She stood there frozen, eyes fixated on the the soft glow. Then, before she really knew what she was doing, Jean stalked quickly toward the house. She didn't bother knocking. She kicked open the door, startling the man inside. Jean could just see Gary in the light of the lantern by his chair.

“So this is what you were so busy doing?” she cried, her voice weak from the cold.

Gary shrugged, not taking his eyes off his lure.

“Talk to me, dammit!” Jean screamed. “I just walked a mile in the freezing cold because *you* couldn't get off your ass and come get me.”

“Hey, watch it—” Gary began threateningly, standing up from his chair. He swayed slightly. He'd had a lot to drink.

“No, you watch it.” Jean's voice cracked as she fought the urge to break down. “All you care about is yourself. I've had it.”

“What are you gonna do?” Gary smirked. “You gonna leave?” He approached her slowly, a dangerous glint in his eyes.

“I'm done, Gary. This marriage is over. This time I mean it.” Jean turned, her hand on the doorknob.

Gary grabbed her by the arm and yanked her back. “You're not going *anywhere*.” His grip tightened.

Jean quivered. Her anger had quickly dissolved into fear. “Let me go,” she choked. “You're hurting me.”

“Should have thought of that before opened your slut mouth,” he snarled.

“Please. Let go. I'm sorry,” Jean pleaded. Tears glistened on her rosy cheeks.

“You're *sawwwrry*,” Gary mocked her cruelly. “Well, *sawwwrry* doesn't cut it!”

A high-pitched yelp escaped Jean as her husband's rough, calloused hand connected with her cheek.

“I hate you!” she screeched. “Hit me again if it makes you feel better, you weak bastard!” So Gary did. He slapped her hard, splitting her lip, then released her. Jean crumpled to the floor, laughing deliriously.

“Shut up!” Gary bellowed as Jean continued. “Shut up!” His foot connected hard with her side. Jean did as all the air escaped her lungs. She laid there, gasping and whimpering as Gary grabbed a large bottle of whiskey from the side of his chair and took a large swig.

Jean struggled to catch her breath while Gary stood over her. He seemed to be thinking something over in his head. Finally, his eyes met hers. His lips twisted into a malicious smile. Jean was in terrible danger.

Gary tilted his head back and drained the rest of his bottle. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand and threw the bottle at Jean’s feet. The glass broke and shards of glass flew in all directions. He laughed as Jean yipped and cowered against the door. As Gary rummaged for another drink, Jean closed her fingers around a large piece of broken bottle.

A hate Jean had never known welled up inside her. For five years she had cowered in her husband’s shadow. Fallen prey to hands that bruised and beat her. Succumbed to his brute strength as he brazenly took her by force and drowned her in whiskey kisses. Not this time. This time she would fight. She wanted to live.

Gary had found a beer hiding in the corner. As he tilted his head back to drink, Jean hurled the bottle fragment at him as hard as she could. The shard caught him by surprise as it connected with his forehead. He stumbled backward over his chair. Jean struggled to her feet. Her fingers fumbled for the handle just as Gary got back up, a wide gash across his temple. Blood ran down his forehead and dripped into his eyes, giving them a sinister look.

“You. Are. Dead.” He lunged for Jean just as her fingers found the handle and the door burst open, sending them both tumbling into the wintry air. A light snow had fallen. Jean landed hard on her back, sending up a puff of white flakes. Gary landed beside her. She edged away

from him in a kind of crab walk as he wildly grabbed for her.

Then they were both on their feet. The chase began. Gary staggered crazily across the frozen lake, disoriented from the booze and loss of blood. Jean wheezed. Her side ached terribly and her legs were numb from the cold and shock. As much as she willed them to go faster, they moved stiffly and clumsily against the ice. Gary trailed close behind.

The pursuit felt endless. Each time Jean thought Gary finally had her, he slipped. When she thought she had put some distance between them, her boots slid out from under her and he was right on top of her again. *So this is what hell must feel like*, Jean thought. She cried between panicked breaths. She looked behind her and felt a twinge of relief as Gary stumbled again. *Stay down*, she prayed, but he was back on his feet in a matter of seconds. He was quickly gaining on her, his once handsome features contorted with rage.

Fear consumed Jean and made each step heavier than the last. “Move!” She told her legs. She was exhausted, soaked, and freezing. If Gary didn’t get her soon she’d die of exposure. Jean cried out as she heard a loud pop and her ankle gave out. She couldn’t run if she tried, but she wasn’t ready to give in. She couldn’t stomach what Gary would do if he caught her. She had to escape. She had to survive. She had to *try*. She scooted along on her butt, using her hands and her good leg. Gary was closing in. In a few moments it’d all be over. He would make her pay dearly for her shortcomings.

She reached her arms far behind her and one of her gloved hands felt an edge that was lower than the rest of the ice. Looking over her shoulder, she realized she had found a spear hole covered with a thin layer of snow. It was frozen around the edges, but the middle was still open, revealing frigid water. Someone must have left it recently and forgot to mark it.

Gary lumbered toward her, his hands outstretched, intent on closing around her throat. Jean had to act fast. She waited until his fingers came dangerously close, then she pushed off with her hands and rolled out of reach. She sat up just in time to see him crash through the ice. He gasped and sputtered as he hit the water, thrashing violently.

“Jesus Christ it's c-cold!” he stuttered, struggling to pull himself up. “Get me out!”

Jean didn't move. She watched as Gary grunted and groaned, trying to hoist himself out of the hole. “Did you hear me?” He snapped. “Help me out of here.” There was a pained, desperate edge to his voice. His resolve to kill her weakened as the elements of that cold Minnesota night slowly drained the life out of him. Jean could only sit and stare. Her plan had worked. The horror was over. Nothing left to do but watch him drown.

“G-get me out,” Gary stuttered. There was a pause. His voice softened, “Jean.” He had used her name. Not a swear like he was apt to do. He sounded so weak, so helpless. He needed her.

Jean inched forward.

“Please,” Gary pleaded. He struggled to stay afloat, his face nearly as white as the snow surrounding him. He feebly clutched the edge. Jean leaned forward slightly and Gary stretched out his hand. But she didn't take it.

“Please, Jean. Baby-Doll.”

Once a term of endearment, the name made Jean's stomach churn. “I'm not your *baby* or your *doll*.”

Gary sputtered, fighting to keep his head above water. Jean watched as he went under for a moment. He came up gasping. Not much longer now. “Jean. Please. G-get me out of here

and we'll t-talk. Things will be d-different," he begged.

Jean took in the man who was her husband. His lips and fingers, tinged blue with the cold. His pale skin. She could just see his eyes. They held a mixture of overwhelming helplessness and fear.

Neither of them said anything for several seconds then she spoke. "Five years, Gare. Five years I've held on, believing you could change. That the man I fell in love with was still in there somewhere. But I've had a lot of time to think, as of late."

"Jean. I'm s-sorry..." Gary's voice was barely above a whisper. "For everyth-thing. I love you! P-please. Just give me a ch-chance."

Jean looked longingly into his eyes, and for one fleeting moment she wavered. She thought about taking his hand. About the two of them helping each other back to the house. She pictured them crying and holding each other. Their bodies pressed tightly together in the shower in a steamy embrace as warm streams washed away the ugliness of the night. She imagined them at the kitchen table, sipping from hot mugs of coffee, calmly talking things out until morning. Gary would get the help he needed, and they would move forward. They would look back on this night as a mere bump in their road to happiness.

Then Jean looked one last time at his hands that held on so loosely to the edge. Those hands that had loved her then wronged her so many times. No matter what she did. No matter what she said. They would always hurt her. "I'm sorry too," Jean's voice cracked. "It's over. The guy I loved died a long time ago."

That was it. She knew it. And Gary knew it, for the last of the fight left his eyes and his hands slowly slipped from the edge, first one, then the other. There was a brief struggle, then he

went under. The sound of splashing water, bubbles breaking the surface, then nothing.

Jean sighed wearily and laid back on the ice. It was snowing again. She felt warm despite the cold. She could hear the high-pitched whir of a snowmobile in the distance. Help was coming. She looked into the night sky as the snow fell around her. She opened her mouth, catching a few flakes on her tongue. Her eyelids felt so heavy.

The horror was over. Jean had finally done what she hadn't been able to do in the five years she was with Gary. She had saved herself. She stared at the hole where her husband's head had been just a few minutes before and felt an immense wave of emotion. *What have I done?* Jean stifled a sob and reached out to touch the edge where her husband's hands had clung to life. Right before she had let him die. "Oh, Gary," she cried. "I'm so sorry. I'm so so sorry."

Suddenly a hand protruded from the icy depths and grabbed her outstretched arm.

Jean woke up screaming, nurses and doctor's hands holding her down while she thrashed and sobbed.

"Jean! Jean! Calm down. You're in the hospital. You're okay. We're trying to help you!"

Jean struggled, breathing heavily as the room came into focus. She glimpsed herself in a mirror. She looked ragged, as if she hadn't slept in days, and her face was severely chapped and frostbitten.

"Jean. It's okay," the nurses repeated. "You're in the hospital. You're safe."

“Safe?” she asked. Then again. “Safe?” She challenged the word, as if offended by it. The heart monitor attached to Jean beeped faster. The doctor stepped forward and produced a syringe from his side and injected its contents into the iv fixed to Jean’s arm. She uttered a weak sob as the room spun out of focus. *Safe*. Jean hung on that word, wondering if she’d ever feel that way again as the room blurred, then went dark.