

Cold Snap

“Let’s go for a drive.”

Charlotte doesn’t answer and reaches for her glass of wine on the coffee table instead. She’s had a glass already, not enough to feel anything yet.

Eric settles himself on the couch next to her, leaving enough distance between their bodies so they aren’t touching. He rests a hand on her thigh. Gives it a squeeze.

“It’s the coldest night of the year,” she says.

And it was. The temperate weather that had everyone hoping for an early spring had taken an abrupt turn five days ago: the temperature plummeted and was still dropping. The cold swept over the area like an invading army ready to impose a new cruel reign. Every night the local news anchors warned that frostbite could occur in minutes, they urged people not to leave pets outside for extended periods of time, and reminded the community to check on elderly neighbors. She has the news on with the volume on mute; tonight they’re running specials on what to do if you lose power and how to keep pipes from freezing.

“We’ll be in the car the whole time. The heat works fine.”

“I don’t really feel like it,” she says.

“Char, I think it would be good to get out of the house.”

Charlotte doesn’t answer at first. She sips her wine.

“I’m not going to make you do something you don’t want to do.”

“I just poured a glass.” She gestures to the bottle on the table, a souvenir from their honeymoon. It doesn’t taste like she remembered. It was supposed to conjure memories of white sand beaches and gleaming sapphire waters, of candy colored houses

that glowed like an aurora beneath the burning of the setting sun, of quiet mornings spent marveling that they'd wake up next to each other for the rest of their lives, but it only tastes like ash in her mouth, like those memories have been burned away and she's been left with nothing but their smoldering remains.

He picks up the bottle and looks at the label. They were supposed to open it on their anniversary, but she'd been desperate tonight and it was the only bottle left on the wine rack. She registers the momentary hurt in his eyes. "Do you remember what that sommelier said?"

She remembers how it rained the whole day they toured the vineyard, how cold she'd been—soaked to the bone and teeth chattering so loud she barely heard the sommelier when he told them *wine is bottled poetry*.

She rises from her well-worn spot on the couch and crosses to the kitchen. "Fine, let's go." She pours the wine down the drain. "This has gone bad anyway."

He hasn't let the car warm up enough and Charlotte is still shivering as they drive. Eric goes exactly the speed limit with his hands at 10:00 and 2:00, something she always found adorably annoying and teased him about—*you're a driver's ed instructor's wet dream*—but which now fills her with a sense of grim tedium. Even though no one is coming he turns on the blinker when they turn, the ticking of the signal like the pulsing of a metronome, counting out the beats of silence between them.

He turns down the lake road; it's a strip of pavement riddled with potholes and a crumbling shoulder, barely wide enough for two cars to pass by. There are no streetlamps. The lake is to the left of them—a man-made puddle congested with weeds

and barely deep enough for boats. She can see only flashes of it in between the houses. To the right there is nothing but trees: forest sentinels, barren and haunting.

The houses along the lakeside are seasonal, serving as summer getaways for families. Summer fades and they move on. Tonight the windows are dark. No one is home.

She adjusts the heater so it's facing her. He always keeps the heat on defrost; the air coming from the vent is weak and temperate, not up to the task of combating the cold outside. Now she wishes she had brought the wine with her, but she knows Eric's been paying attention to her drinking lately, keeping a tally in his head every time she pours a glass, counting the bottles in the recycling. According to him it's not a proper coping mechanism.

A snowflake hits the windshield and melts away almost instantly. It fills her with a sudden remorse, this unique, delicate thing going *splat* against the glass and vanishing without a trace. She thinks that anything can be susceptible to this spontaneous fracturing.

Eric drums his thumbs against the steering wheel. "Do you want to talk about it?"

For an absurd moment she thinks he means the snowflake, like he's somehow read her mind. "What?"

He sighs like he does when he thinks she's being difficult on purpose. "It happened to both of us, you know."

She doesn't answer. Looks out the window. The full moon reflects off the frozen water. "The lake looks like a mirror tonight."

"It's no one's fault, Char."

“I know.”

“I just don’t want you blaming yourself.”

“I’m not.”

“It’s just a thing that happens.”

“I’ve known plenty of people who’ve had it happen to them.”

“So have I. I just want things to go back to normal. I just want us to be happy.”

She wonders how he can want such a thing. How he doesn’t see it as a betrayal. She cannot help but feel he has violated the cautious truce they’ve established, the way they tacitly agreed to dance around the other’s sorrow. Him ignoring the way she drinks every night now, her teeth and mouth stained purple; the perpetual red lines around her eyes either from tears or lack of sleep, sometimes both; how on the nights she doesn’t fall asleep on the couch she rolls away from his touch in bed; the books, dog-eared and well-read he found in the trash next to unopened sympathy cards. Her not mentioning the boxes of clothes he’s sent back; the empty space in the second bedroom; the smell of fresh paint; the way he’s been spending longer and longer at the office, not getting home until she’s already lightheaded and numb.

“Alright then” she says, “let’s be happy.”

“Don’t be like that.”

“Do you even love me anymore?”

He slams his palms against the steering wheel. The whole car shakes, and she feels the reverberations of his grievances and frustrations. He looks over at her. “What is wrong with you?”

“There’s nothing wrong with me. Just stop talking, please.” She looks ahead at the dark road. The car’s headlights cut two strips of buttery incandescence into the night. She wants nothing more than to return to the old versions of themselves, but the people they were before are as distant and foreign as celestial beings, glorified deities that maybe never existed at all.

There’s a flash of brown and white as something darts out from the tree line and into the road. She sees it: the whites of its eyes, the alarm and shock there, the paralysis of its limbs. The cold makes everything slow and desperate. She gasps, tries to say something, she wants to scream at the thing, to grab the wheel and swerve, but Eric is still looking at her and—too late. There’s a sickening *thunk* and they both jolt in their seats like they’ve hit an unexpected speed bump.

“What was that?” Eric whips around in his seat. Checks his mirrors.

“Pull over.”

He slows and moves the car as far over onto the shoulder as he can. He switches on the four-way emergency flashers, intermittent bursts of light pulsing through the dark.

“Are you okay?”

“I think you hit an animal.” She unfastens her seatbelt, opens the door.

“You’re not going out there.”

She is already on her knees checking under the car. Nothing.

“Char, stop.”

The brake lights cast a red glow behind them. She doesn’t feel the cold at first, it’s clever like that: a thief that infiltrates the body down to the marrow and leeches away the heat first and drains you of your strength next without you ever being any wiser. She

remembers one of the newscasters, the perky blonde with the saccharine smile and a wardrobe seemingly consisting of only pastels, warning about the dangers of hypothermia, how it often takes people's sanity before it takes their lives.

Her breath, coming out in short gasps, freezes in the air before her. She isn't wearing a hat or gloves and only has on an old college sweatshirt; it's ratty and thin, a pitiful shield against the elements. Her exposed skin on her fingers and face sting with the bitter air's impact.

She hears Eric behind her, fumbling with his own seatbelt and calling after her. She advances down the road. There's nothing here. Just a pothole, she thinks, it was just a pothole—but she was so sure of what she saw.

“Shit it's cold.” Eric is beside her; he cups his hands up against his mouth and huffs air into them. He came more prepared in a parka and Bruin's knit hat she'd gotten him for his birthday, but he still bounces on his feet as if staying in motion will make him a harder target for the cold to get to—like he's preparing to run away. He takes a perfunctory look down the road. “Whatever it was, it's gone now.” He tries to put his arm around her, to steer her back to the car, but she shrugs out of his touch.

Every breath she takes feels like it's laced with shards of frozen glass. She relishes it and sucks it down greedily. She wants to pierce her lungs with it until they're nothing but ragged tissue, to let it ice over her heart until it's nothing but a fossilized pit, to freeze her blood with it until her veins are rivers of red slush.

She hears a sound, a weak rustling coming almost from the tree line. She goes towards it. Everything seems to move slower in the cold; it's like wading through mud.

The car's brake lights are still on, casting the trees in a red glow. She crosses the shoulder of the road where it drops down into a ditch.

And then she sees it:

A shallow chest heaving, starved and thin, huge ears flayed to the side, legs twitching and bent, black eyes darting, tawny fur smattered in red like a Jackson Pollock painting.

The cold must have forced it on a desperate mission out beyond the trees where it usually foraged, everything around its warren either frozen or dead. It moves feebly, trying to get away. She wants to scoop it up into her arms and care for it. She wants to bring it up to her breast, gore and all, and rock it back and forth like a sleepless child. She wants to save it, but the rabbit is dying. She knows what they're supposed to do: put it out of its misery. This was their doing, it's their responsibility.

"We can't just leave it there."

The sound of Eric's voice shocks her; she didn't notice him standing there. He's said exactly what she was thinking, and she has the sudden sick realization that he is going to find a rock or use his boots and finish the job. She wants to rage at him, tell him no you can't, but she watches in horrified silence as he makes his way down into the ditch.

His movements are slow and deliberate; he's careful not to startle the rabbit more. He's hovering over it, assessing, blocking it from her view like he wants to protect her from seeing what's about to happen. But then he shrugs off his coat. He lays it over the broken body and it takes her a moment to realize he is swaddling it. The rabbit offers no resistance. Eric picks the bundle up and sure-footedly finds his way back up to the road.

He handles it so tenderly that it brings tears to her eyes. They leave frozen tracks down her cheeks.

Through the folds of the coat she sees only a patch of brown fur. Eric's exposed arms are already red and covered in gooseflesh, but he's not shivering. Neither is she anymore. She's heard that you actually feel warmer as you freeze to death, an irrational paradox that occurs when the nerves get so frayed and the mind becomes so fragmented that the body betrays itself. She thinks that they've both been slowly wasting away, that they're in the final stages of that deathly grip.

She takes him by the arm and they cross the road until they're standing looking out at the lake. She was wrong; it doesn't look like a mirror. The frozen and cracked surface leaves everything warped and distorted. In its reflection the moon is an amber smudge, the trees are dark blurred shadows. They stand there until the bundle in his arms goes still.

"Where should we leave him?"

She doesn't answer, still staring at the ice. Every year this water freezes, cracks, thaws. There are fissures like dark and deep scars along the lake's surface where the water never came back together properly.

Eric places the bundle by the side of the water, a dark silhouette against the moonlight. He always was willing to leave dead things behind.