

## Snowfall

“Can you believe that?”

Peter returned his eyes to the questioning voice. It came from a crackling smile, framed by glossy red lips turned upwards with the excitement of provocation. As he stared they slowly lost their sharp smirk and fell into a flat, but puckered position.

“Right, never mind. It’s just like you to be modest.” they uttered. Peter contemplated responding, but no words came to him. By the time he had control of his jaw again, the silence had already lasted too long.

A martini glass entered his scope of vision, being tilted to the lips and sipped from delicately. As Peter watched more details came into view: pale, round cheeks bordered by a bob of dark brown hair; heavy eyelashes that pointed down towards the glass and flicked back upwards ferociously; the contours of a smooth black dress draped over the stout woman who wore it. *Who was this woman?* he thought. He couldn’t seem to remember...

“I thought it was ridiculous at least,” the woman continued. “Ten years slaving away for those shit heads and this was how they repay me?”

Peter shook his head to appease her. Names began to form in his head but none of them stuck. Margo...Mary...Melissa...they fell from the dim lamp that hung above them but slid right off the woman’s dress and onto the hardwood floors beneath. Peter looked down to his hand that rested on the small square table separating him from the

woman. His fingers grazed the rough fibers of the wood, but the table's polish eased the friction. It was cherry oak. He wasn't sure how he knew that.

"I told Nicole about it but of course she just spouted the same empty optimism bullshit. I think she's still mad at me after the Thanksgiving thing..."

The lights dimmed and the entire restaurant seemed to soften with them. The woman rambled but the words no longer reached Peter. Instead, they bounced in all directions, some getting lost in the roaring conversations of nearby tables, some falling on the trays of waiters walking by, and some floating right past Peter's ears. The restaurant they were seated in was filled with patrons chattering as tirelessly as the woman across from him. Their conversations reverberated in his skull, oscillating in time with the woman's voice and landing in the mug in front of Peter. They disturbed the golden liquid inside, causing the surface to ripple. This only lasted a moment before the lights surged and brought the room back to normal.

As the woman continued talking, Peter scanned the restaurant. Their table was one of many that lined a narrow corridor that eventually opened up into a larger dining room. He looked past the dining room to the front of the restaurant, which was bound by frosted glass paneling. Peter's gaze remained stuck on the glass storefront, as if it were trying to press through. At the bottom and top the glass became more clear, revealing the occasional bare leg clicking by in a high heel or the black shine of a dress shoe floating past. Through the top of the window Peter saw a pervading golden light interrupted only by a few white specks: snow lazily gliding then vanishing in the warmth of a streetlamp, informing Peter it was nighttime, and winter.

He wondered whether the world actually existed beyond the glass, or whether it was merely an illusion. He imagined himself peeling the storefront back like a sheet of worn wallpaper, revealing not a snowy city street but an empty black abyss. Or maybe, he thought, there were faces peering from the other side, staring at his shoes--he looked to his feet to find brown loafers--faces laughing with delight at some knowledge Peter lacked. The more legs that swept in the clear section of the glass, the less they felt real; they were too fluid, the pants and long skirts above them swishing back and forth in the wind, the arcs of the steps too purposeful. If he could watch them intently enough, Peter thought, maybe he would get swept in them as well.

“Are you feeling alright?” The woman said, her words piercing the indistinct hum of voices in the restaurant.

“Yeah, sorry. I’m in a weird mood.” Peter responded. The sound of his voice startled him. It was deep, falling deeper into the microscopic cracks of the wooden table than his fingers could reach. His voice rang in his ears even after they were spoken, as if they came from behind him and echoed back.

“Oh, good!” the woman remarked, dramatically dropping her shoulders in relief. “In Peter world, weird is normal!” She chortled to herself, but when Peter didn’t return her laugh, she brought her martini to her mouth once more. Peter kept his eyes focused on his fingers but from the ring of the glass being slammed back on the table he could tell two things: it was empty, and this woman was drunk.

The lights dipped again, this time lower, then in an instant the room before Peter changed entirely. He was a child again, three feet shorter, standing in the arched

entryway to his grandmother's living room. Every detail was perfectly illuminated by the soft orange light of the lamp in the corner: across from him were the white embroidered curtains bouncing in the breeze of the opened window directly across from him; to his left he saw shelves lining the wall filled with oddities like a small, freshly-polished ceramic cat, a basket full of mismatched gloves and scarves, and a round brass canister filled with coins and crumpled receipts; to his right, sat in an ornate wooden chair with faded maroon cushions he could see the curly matted hair of his grandma, hunched over a coffee table, her long, spotted, frail fingers gently gliding a paintbrush over small rectangles of cardstock. It wasn't real, yet every perfectly defined feature of the memory felt more tangible than anything before his actual eyes.

He knew how this scene would play out. He knew that once he stepped forward, once his feet became cradled by the long tendrils of his grandma's shag carpet, she would look up, eyes magnified by saucer-shaped spectacles, and ask him why he was up before sunrise. He knew that when he asked what she was doing, she would tell him how her mind got too busy sometimes, "like the wind hollering outside," and that she needed something to quiet it. He knew he would watch her paint her own playing cards, awestruck by her precision, then splatter paint on a card himself crudely. He could see every frame that played out once his foot stepped forward, but he held it still, resting instead in the stillness of the moment and the silence of his grandma's work.

The lights returned to normal, restoring the sight of the restaurant to his eyes as if his memories were only a thin film stuck between him and the present, their details made transparent by the light shining through to him. He dug his nails into the wood of

the table, afraid if he didn't cling tightly enough, the present moment would slip away from him and be lost forever.

"What's wrong? Let me help hun." The words registered in Peter's mind only in their saccharine demand of a response. His vision refocused on the woman across from him, but he couldn't bring himself to look at her mouth, fearing it would be like looking directly into the sun, so instead he let his eyes lock a few inches below it, on her black choker.

"Nothing. Really, I'm fine." he said, releasing his grip on the table. He looked away from the woman and scanned his eyes through the restaurant, desperately trying to find an object to cling to before he vanished entirely. No matter where he looked, though, the details of the room remained indistinct, blurring together and slipping through the grasp of his attention as if every movement, every sound were too unimportant to collect.

He returned his gaze to the mug in front of him, allowing the foreground to blur. Yet, even this was too ordinary. The mug was entirely featureless, being only a pure white mug with clear bronze liquid inside. Peter reached out and brought it to his lips, sipping the warm drink, but was only able to taste a vague, sweet fruitiness. He returned the mug to the table. Now it was empty.

The woman stood from her chair, still chattering, and Peter followed suit instinctively. She turned and walked and he followed, carefully swerving to avoid bumping into the tables that lined the long corridor, passing next through the main dining room. The mood lighting and drone of conversation that filled the room weighed

on Peter, slowing his steps. It felt as though it took minutes to reach the exit, but when at last they did, the woman pushed open a glass door and disappeared into the darkness, and Peter walked after her, as if he were her shadow, stopping only to receive a beige jacket that was thrust into his arms by an unseen person. Finally, he exited the restaurant, becoming engorged in the chilly black void that awaited him.

When at last he escaped the stuffy air and orange light of the restaurant, he found he was once again somewhere else entirely. He was walking through a park, shoes echoing on the pavement of a winding path that was lined with young oak trees. It was a clear summer night, where the cloudless sky and pure air was matched by the freedom Peter felt being between college semesters. He knew the park was lively with sounds--the clattering of leaves in the summer breeze, cicadas calling out from hidden branches, the delighted screams of children playing down the path--sounds which he could hear perfectly if he focused on them, but which faded into the background as his head was filled only with his footsteps and those of Jason, his best friend, that underscored them.

He looked up to Jason's pale, round face as the trees passed by to find a mischievous smirk. Jason looked back at him and in the brief moment of eye contact they shared, Peter saw a buzz, a spark in the center of Jason's iris. He wasn't sure whether it was simply a reflection of a streetlamp that lit the park path, or something more important, something which Peter's eyes mirrored back and which both boys left unsaid.

Peter had walked this exact path, on this exact night, with Jason many times trying to identify that spark. It was only this time that he realized it must have been something more. Just as the two broke eye contact and resumed looking forward, Peter remembered he had seen that spark countless times before.

They had so many plans--they were going to make their own video game, they were going to get rich and have families that came together every week for backyard barbecues in mansions they couldn't possibly fill. The two spent every night together in those days, working tirelessly in their cramped apartment and, when their laughter refused to concede to concentration, roaming the city streets and finding new ways to get into trouble. And that spark, Peter now realized, that ripple of light he saw in the park that summer night, it was always in Jason's eyes.

Just when he was on the brink of understanding what he'd failed to for so long, the moment was cut short as the two reached a clearing and stopped walking. Out beyond them was a large expanse of rolling hills. Peter's eyes were caught by golden ringlets of hair, swaying in the wind, that hung over the back of a bench in the distance. The two boys looked at each other, sharing a knowing grin, then Peter crouched down onto the ground and began crawling towards the bench. Jason did the same, waddling just behind Peter, until the two were only feet away from the bench and the girl who sat on it. They shared another glance, this time with Peter counting down from three silently on his fingers. When his last finger was lowered, the two lunged forward and roared in unison.

The girl turned her head, unaffected. "It's about time," she chided, "You boys aren't as stealthy as you think." Peter's face fell in disappointment, but after a moment of silence the girl winked at him and the three burst out in laughter. At the time, the laughter was unremarkable to Peter, but reliving this, he realized it was special; it was the kind of laughter shared by friends who were relieved to be in each other's presence. The girl hopped over the bench and pulled Jason into a hug, then Peter. He felt her name melt through his mind the same way he felt her cotton sundress fold in his arms and her flowery scent drizzle over him like honey. Chelsea--a name Peter missed speaking aloud.

When they finished greeting each other, Chelsea reached with both hands into a small backpack that sat resting on the bench. She ruffled through the bag, then pulled both hands out clasped together, and stuck them out. "I got you both something," she said.

Jason pleaded with her to open it impatiently, but his efforts only made Chelsea giggle. She looked at Peter and smirked. "What about you? Do you want to know what it is?" she asked.

Peter merely nodded his head. "Alrighty then," she chirped. Peter looked to her delicate hands as they opened slowly into a cupped position.

They were empty, but the more Peter looked at them, the more he realized these were no longer Chelsea's hands, but his own. A single snowflake landed in his left palm. *How long ago was that?* he wondered. He wasn't sure how to measure the time. *Where was Jason now? Where was Chelsea?*

He looked up, finding himself back in front of the restaurant. The woman from before was now gone. Peter pulled his hands apart and let the snowflake drift to the ground, watching as it got lost in a flurry of hundreds of others that surrounded it. He looked up, eyes scanning the road in front of him. All the pedestrians he'd observed earlier had found their destinations, leaving the street empty, dark, and quiet. He turned around to face the restaurant, finding its golden light still drifting through the frosted glass. He looked down to the clear portion on the bottom. He could see no feet, no movement, only the legs of tables and the restaurant's wooden floors. Now he was the passerby; now he was an illusion.

He turned once more and began to walk along the sidewalk away from the restaurant, his feet forming impressions in the thin blanket of snow that had begun to coat the ground. Once the light of the restaurant was behind him, he had only the dim light of streetlamps to chart his way through the darkness. To his left and right were stretches of apartment buildings built of plain brick, with not a single illuminated window. *It must be late*, he thought. He couldn't recall how to get home, or at least he couldn't hear the directions in his head, but when the buildings to his right broke for an intersection, he instinctively turned and followed it, electing to walk in the middle of the street.

The snow started coming down harder, forming into large clumps that filled Peter's footprints before another could be laid. He continued to walk thoughtlessly down the street until he passed a bench and a bus stop that sat on the sidewalk to his right, at which point he halted and stood still in the growing snow. He looked behind him,

squinting his eyes to see the road he'd come from through the rapid procession of snowflakes that interrupted his line of sight. He couldn't see the street he came from; he couldn't see the path he'd taken to get to this spot. He'd never be able to walk that path again.

Peter faced his body forward but found that he no longer could find where forward was. The snow darted down so quickly that the world beyond could no longer be seen between the snowflakes, yet it landed in silence, laying itself over the Earth ephemerally. *This is a dream*, he thought, *but when did I fall asleep?*

The snow spiraled around him and the world seemed to spin with it. Peter stumbled in circles trying to find his bearings, but everywhere he looked he only found the snow and the off-white reflection of streetlamps that glowed through the entire horizon like a dense fog. He imagined the brush of shag carpet against his feet and the delicate rub of a sundress on his arms, he tried to pretend that the violent wind was a warm summer breeze, but those feelings were foreign to him now. Filled with desperate energy, Peter trudged through the snow in a jog, trying to break through the spectral white wall any way he could. He convinced himself if he could find its weak spot, he would awaken, he would tumble through the snow and fall in the swaying grass of a summer night years past. But his attempts were in vain. No matter in which direction he ran or how far, he was stuck in the storm. His legs stilled in the snow.

Here, exiled in an endless void of frozen effervescence, Peter knew the restaurant no longer existed, nor did the woman who'd gone there with him. Jason and Chelsea were gone, lost in a flurry of time and stuck at an unconquerable distance.

Even Peter's grandma had disappeared, her white curls absorbed in the arabesques of the wind-swept snow, and the sounds of her fingers swiping a paintbrush over cardstock concealed in the hushed termination of snow rested on the ground. There was only Peter. The light pulsed and the wind whistled, copying the ebb and flow of Peter's breath. The snow fell so fast it seemed impossible for it to get any faster; the light grew brighter until it threatened to blight all of existence. Just as the maelstrom reached its climax, the wind became silent. Even Peter's breath seemed to halt. He submitted himself to the snow. He closed his eyes and waited to disappear himself.

Peter didn't know how long he waited, but when his eyes opened again the blizzard had ceased. He was still there; no matter how numb his skin felt it still distinguished him from the world around. Suddenly the bright light that reflected off the snow burned in Peter's eyes, a sting which was echoed by the kiss of freezing wind on his cheeks and the bite of snow that had accumulated on his ears. The world beyond the snow gradually became visible and Peter saw lights in the apartment windows that surrounded him. In the distance he heard the crackle of a shovel being dragged along the ground and the groan of passing cars. None of it sounded pleasant, but he heard it; he was here. He lifted his feet, one by one, feeling the weight of the snow piled on his shoes, and made his way to the bench adjacent to the road.

Once there he reached in his pocket and pulled out a golden button. He ran it through his fingers, feeling every curve and hole like he had done for years every time he'd stuck his hand in his pocket. His fingers had its shape memorized, but this time he was feeling it to forget. He returned the button to the pocket it came from and slipped

the jacket off, folding it neatly. Finally he crouched and placed the jacket gently on the snow next to the bench. "I was here," he whispered to himself.

Peter stood. He knew that once he lifted his foot he'd walk past the jacket, leaving it behind, and that he'd find his way home, actually hearing the directions in his head and studying the city like he'd never done before. Without hesitation, he lifted his foot and took a step.