

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

Geoffrey Craig
Snow (Part III)

They stood looking out a front window. The storm was finally grinding to a halt. Only a few flakes continued to fall, and the sun was fighting its way through the blanket of clouds. Patches of blue showed here and there. He had no idea how much snow had fallen, but the drifts had buried the lower branches of the pines and climbed halfway up the saplings. A foot or more covered the porch, and several inches had blown up against the front door. He had checked the power a few minutes ago – still out.

“We’ll have a shit-load of shoveling to do,” she said.

She had not responded to his hand on her shoulder; and after a few awkward seconds, he had returned to his chair. Her story had left him stunned and bewildered. He felt an overwhelming sense of sorrow. What she had gone through was so horrific that he wondered how she had maintained her sanity.

One tough cookie.

He could not imagine how he would have coped. Domestic violence and abuse were all too common – even in Wells City – but hearing about it over a kitchen table brought it very up close. The dog’s barking to go out had roused them from the armchairs. A little later, she fixed turkey sandwiches for lunch. “If you can call this compressed whatever turkey.” Said with bitterness and not a trace of either humor or irony. She took a couple of bites and then put down the tooth-marked sandwich. “I don’t know what made me think I was hungry.” She stared at her plate and then at him. He felt like a butterfly pinned in a glass case. After waiting a moment, he asked one of the questions that had been buzzing around in his head:

“Do you regret the guilty plea?”

“Prentice didn’t deserve to die no matter how evil and perverted he was. If I’d moved ahead with the divorce, none of it would’ve happened. So I reckon I deserved to do some time. I didn’t deserve to lose Emma.”

“Did the D.A. think you invented the story of the black guy?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

“Everything worked against you.”

“Ain’t that the truth?”

He thought back to that summer in camp. Maybe he should tell her that story after all. *Doesn’t compare to hers but it’s not a competition, is it?* He took a bite from his sandwich and chewed without tasting it. He took a sip of whiskey. Were they on their third or fourth glass?

“Did your lawyer consider a plea of temporary insanity?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“My training.”

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

"We talked about it, but he didn't think it would fly. I hoped that serving time might help Emma forgive me. I was such an idiot."

"That old hope thing again."

"You're not such a bad guy ... for a banker."

She got up and walked to a window. After a couple of minutes, he joined her.



He turned away from the window.

"Let's get at it then," he said.

Working side by side, they started at the kitchen door and worked towards the garage. Before long, his arms felt like deadweight; and his head spun from the whiskey. For each step forward, they had to work through a good two feet of snow. He thanked God it was dry and powdery. Still, progress came dear; and with the sun now out in full force, sweat soon drenched his shirt. He went back to the kitchen and flung his overcoat over a chair. She did the same. He was grateful for the wrap-around sunglasses. The glare, otherwise, would've fractured his eyeballs. Halfway to the garage, she called a break. As she turned towards the house, she slipped. He caught her before she could fall into the snow bank.

"Good reaction time," she said. "The whiskey doesn't seem like such a great idea now."

Her grin surprised him.

"If I end up head first in a snow bank," he said, "you will take the trouble to pull me out, won't you?"

"Yeah, maybe or leave you for the coyotes and take the boots and trousers. Could have re-sale value." She started towards the house. "I'll be right back."

He rested on his shovel handle for a minute and then started up again. He threw aside a large shovelful and felt a twinge in his lower back. *Slow down, tough guy. Someone else does this at the condo.* Ignoring his own advice, he put his back into it.

"Whoa: slow down. We got all afternoon. The plows might not be here until tonight. They got lots of roads to clear."

She handed him a glass of water.

"Just trying to prove I'm younger than I am."

"No one here worth proving it to."

She let Jethro out. The shepherd bounded down the path, tail wagging like a flag, and leapt into the snow. He looked puzzled and shamefaced as they pulled him out.

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

"He's never seen this much snow," she said.

They cleared the path to the garage in just over an hour, but the driveway was a horse of another color: two hours and counting. They were dripping when they got to the road. "We'll have to dig again once the plow passes. Now for the shed." The light was fading and the woods darkening when they finished a path to the shed. He studied the slope rising behind her house. Smoke from the metal pipe chimney drifted towards the woods. He smelled the tang of the fire.

"A path loops through the woods. It's a nice walk. By tomorrow, there'll be tracks all over the place. Know what a wild turkey track looks like?"

He shook his head. She took a stick from the shed and drew three prongs in the snow. The middle prong stuck out further than the other two.

"Coyote?"

"Nope."

She blocked out a triangular pad and then four oval pads, each with a claw.

"Raccoon," he said.

She drew what looked to him like a hand without a thumb. Next, she drew a large oval that tapered towards the rear. In front of the large oval, she placed five small ovals and claws.

"Care to hazard a guess?"

"Abominable snowman."

"Close," she said. "Black bear."

"You mean like the one over there?"

He nodded towards the woods.

"No way," she said but glanced towards the woods. She turned back. "They're hibernating, wise ass." She shoved him. He let go of his shovel and fell backwards into the snow. "I'm sorry," she cried out, "really sorry. It was supposed to be only a tap." She helped him out. He glared at her. She had not let go of his hands. Neither moved.

"Some tap," he growled and pulled her towards him. Leaning upwards, he kissed her on the lips. She let go his hands, put her arms around him and kissed back. It lasted but an instant. He pulled away.

"Sorry," he said. "I hadn't planned on that."

He went to the shed for an armful of wood.

"That's okay," she murmured, watching him.

They carried in several armloads of wood, and she lit the candles. He swore under his breath as he played a light switch up and down.

"I know you're getting antsy," she said. "Power shouldn't be long."

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

"Hope so. Need to call my aunt in Janesville. She was expecting me and must be worried sick."

"Nothing you can do."

"Don't you think I know that?"

"Biting my head off won't help."

"Sorry."

She made tea. He added logs to the fire. They sat by the stove. Jethro, tired from running along the shoveled paths, fell asleep at her feet. She stroked his back with her toe.

"Your turn," she said.

"To do what?"

"Tell a story. The one you refused to tell yesterday."

He stared at the fire. Painful feelings surged through him. He glanced at her. Her expression showed patience. Prison would teach you patience.

"It doesn't compare to yours. Very little would. Despite my awful marriage and worse divorce, I've been very lucky. Hell, losing my job ended up as an opportunity."

"Stop procrastinating and tell the damn story. I want to know what makes you tick."

"I was twelve and didn't have many friends. Correction: no real friends. I played soccer, which was scorned by the self-styled real jocks." He snorted derisively. "I was born too soon. I also played Little League baseball but who didn't. Despite being good at soccer, I was what today they'd call a nerd. I got top grades and liked to read. I didn't have a girl friend, but I did play spin-the-bottle once at a party. Why I was invited to that particular party remains a mystery. I can't remember any others."

"Tommy Mallory. Don't forget that name. Class President. Star of gridiron and diamond. Every bobby-soxer's dream. My friend – or so I thought. Came over to my house every once in a while. We traded baseball cards. I had some good ones. He also had cards of another sort: girls with big, naked breasts and leering grins. Almost lost it just looking at them."

"Tommy went to this incredible sleep-away summer camp: Eagle's Nest. I went to a local day camp. Specialties: arts and crafts, swimming in the weedy, muddy pond, paddling in one of the two leaky canoes – would've sunk had there been enough water in the pond – and playing tennis on cement courts with cracks that looked like an earthquake had rumbled through. My folks had near heart attacks when I told them I wanted to go to Eagle's Nest. Why would I want to leave my friends at the local camp. Friends? I had no clue what a financial burden this represented for my parents. Especially since Sis was also headed to her first sleep-away camp that summer. But I prevailed."

"Riding in the bus through the camp's gate, my heart took flight – like the carved eagle surmounting the gate. The afternoon sun sparkled on the still waters of the camp's lake. A lake, not an overgrown pond. Snakelike wiggles of reflected light pulsed along the lower branches of the maples

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

that bordered the lake. A dock stuck out from the shore like a pig's snout. Racks of canoes stood to attention at one side of the dock. Not one of them with a leak, I told myself and grinned. A raft bobbed rhythmically fifty yards from the dock. Not much of a swimmer, I told myself I'd make it with no sweat by summer's end.

"On the other side of the road from the lake, I counted four tennis courts, two baseball diamonds and a large field of shorn grass. The big, yellow school bus curved right and down a slight incline coming to a stop in front of a large, log structure. This housed the administrative offices, recreation center, snack bar and dining room. The latter, with a raised stage at one end, also served as the auditorium for improvised skits, camp meetings and the play which the senior campers wrote and performed a couple of weeks before the end of camp. Two basketball courts jutted out from behind the building.

"Trembling with excitement, I got off the bus. Tommy had sat with another kid from school. I gave them a big smile as they scrambled down the steps. They didn't acknowledge me. Had I done something wrong? I turned away and saw the head of a buck whose enormous antlers arched over the entrance. Hunters abounded in our town, but my father was not one of them. He found hunting boring – or worse. If you wanted meat, you went to the supermarket. Why then, I asked, did Mom plant a vegetable garden? He told me to go read a book."

"A junior Senior Credit Officer."

"I did start young with the pointed questions. Some people find it irritating."

"Their problem. I find it ... appealing. Shows you're interested. Lots of people prefer to talk about themselves. You've met the type. *Well, I've talked enough about me. So what do you think of me?*

He laughed.

"Thank you for the compliment."

"I am capable of them from time to time." She smiled. "More tea?"

"That would be nice."

She filled the kettle from a water jug. Her hair looked like a cyclone had gone through it. He didn't even like his own hair a little wind-blown. They certainly were different. In some ways.

"I must've been all of five," he said, "when I asked Dad why he was watering the lawn.

"To make the grass grow," he said.

"Then why did you cut it last week?"

"You must've been all kinds of fun as a kid."

They resumed their seats by the stove. He gazed at a flickering candle and sipped his tea. She put a plate of cookies on the coffee table.

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

"Our counselor led us from the main building along the rutted, dirt road. We passed a volleyball court, the Arts and Crafts building – a regular building – and a large log structure marked: Toilets and Showers. Then came two parallel rows of cabins – six to a row. Another bathroom building marked the limit of the camp. Two trails led from there into the woods. One circled the lake, and the other wound into the hills.

"Each cabin had an animal name. Mine was Moose and was the third in line. We climbed three steps to a tiny porch and went inside. Ten metal-framed beds formed two rows, the ends sticking into the center of the room. Under each bed was a storage box, and each camper was also assigned two drawers in one of five well-worn bureaus ranged along the walls. A bed at the far end and perpendicular to the other beds belonged to the counselor who had his own four-drawer rough-hewn, maple bureau. Neatly stacked on each bed were two gray flannel sheets, a pillow and pillow case, two scratchy wool blankets, two towels and a wash cloth."

He swallowed some tea and took a jam-filled cookie. She leaned forward and also took one.

"Good," he said. "Homemade?"

"Somebody's home."

"Tommy and the other kid from my town, Gary Seeley, were in my cabin but rushed to grab beds next to each other. I had planned on becoming best friends with Tommy, and here he was as far from me as possible. He hadn't told me that Gary was coming to the camp.

"Each cabin became a team that competed with the other eleven cabins for the privilege of getting its name inscribed on a plaque in the Aerie – the balcony overlooking the dining room. Each of the winning campers got a special prize, which remained a closely-guarded secret until Bonfire Night. Four of the older campers had their names inscribed twice. In his two years at Eagle's Nest, Tommy's team hadn't won; but he expected to change that this year.

"That afternoon, Moose played Rattlesnake in baseball. We had a combined coaching session first: throwing, fielding and batting. Then we did wind sprints and a jog twice around the baseball field. I noticed Tommy say something to Rick, our counselor; and when Rick announced our starting line-up, I was on the bench. I got put in at right field for the fifth inning; but by then, we were ahead 7 – 2. There were only six innings."

"Off to a running start," she said.

"Very perceptive."

She gave him a nasty look.

"Sorry. I meant that to be funny."

"Is that so?"

He decided to move on with the story.

"It didn't take long for things to get worse. Soccer counted for nothing at Eagle's Nest despite being the world's most popular sport. Nobody

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

played. Not even pick-up games. Planet football, baseball and basketball. I stank at basketball, was a decent catcher but they only played me in the outfield and didn't know from football. I had great running stamina, but all the track contests involved short races, and I couldn't sprint for beans. I could dribble circles around anyone in camp, but no one gave a shit. Last man on the Moose running team, I cost us two big races."

"Getting more popular by the minute, were you?"

"More miserable is more like it."

"My turn to be sorry. Trying to be funny doesn't seem to work for either of us right now. Go on."

"Let me tell you about basketball – a sport I despise. Being short was not a good start; and for some reason, I always made a buffoon of myself. We had it in Phys-Ed at school. Frigging disaster. Same at camp. Even on the second team, the only kid worse than me was overweight and had two left feet. That was Phil Ogilvy. More about him in a second. My teammates – using the term loosely – razed me except when we lost. Then they blamed me. Fun, fun and more fun. Today, I play halfway decent tennis. Back then, I didn't know which end of the racquet to hit the ball with. My swimming actually improved although I rarely went out to the raft where the cool guys hung out.

"Phil and I were the only new kids in the cabin. The others had two or three summers at the camp. We didn't know the inside jokes or camp legends, and no one clued us in. Phil had a brain as big as his belly. Guy is probably a physicist today. He couldn't believe his parents had sent him to Eagle's Nest.

"They hoped I would lose weight. Lots of luck.

"During free time, Phil and I hiked into the hills. You were allowed to hike up the first ridge so long as your counselor knew where you were going. The path followed a gurgling stream that cascaded over smooth boulders and eddied into pools where we saw brown trout. Wild raspberry bushes grew in abundance. We each brought a pail but ate on the spot most of what we picked.

"Why share with those dorks?" Phil asked rhetorically.

"I'm ashamed to say I spent no time with Phil except on our hikes. Didn't want to spoil my chances of getting accepted. You see, they teased Phil even worse than me. Accepted! What a joke! What an idiot! Phil stood up for me when things got really bad."

"Seems you wanted what you couldn't have and couldn't accept what you did have."

"A philosopher?"

"Just common sense."

"Which I was short on for a long time." He took his tea mug into the kitchen and set it on the counter. He took another cookie and settled back in his chair. "What puzzles me is why it took me so long."

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

"If you knew the answer to that question, maybe you'd be Senior Fucking Credit Officer."

"Maybe I would." He thought for a second before continuing. "Rick, our sadist of a counselor, delighted in razing me and Phil since we were competing for the bottom rung of the Moose social ladder. If you didn't know better, you might have thought it was just friendly better. Phil and I knew better. On the other hand, Rick doted on Tommy. In today's world, you'd be suspicious."

"Guess that makes today a better world," she said.

"Never thought of it like that."

She smiled, broad and toothy. He liked her smile.

"Leave it to an ex-con," she said. "Keep going. I hope this gets more interesting than boys will be boys."

"I'm not sure interesting is the right word. Besides my hikes with Phil, one other good thing happened. I got taken on to help make sets for the play. The senior campers had all the parts and good jobs, but it got me out of the cabin; and the kids working on the play had either no time or no inclination to harass me. The performance also took place on the one day that parents were allowed to visit. I couldn't wait to show off my work to Mom and Dad.

"One afternoon, after I had been at Eagle's Nest for four weeks, as I returned to the cabin from working on sets, I noticed Gary standing on the porch. He glanced at me and then went inside. I followed him, wondering what was up. Some new trick like the time my friendly cabin-mates put a rubber snake in my bed? I saw Will Roth in tears and four of the other guys sitting on their beds, looking like Space Avengers. Tommy walked up to me and whispered:

"Someone stole Will's transistor radio. Rick is super pissed off. He'll murder whoever did it.

"Why would anyone do that?"

"Why does anyone do anything?"

Rick searched in bureaus and under beds and even lifted up mattresses. He looked grim, and I pitied the poor kid who had done it. He got to my bed, searched my drawers and found nothing. He looked under my pillow: nothing. He lifted my mattress and then pulled out the storage box. He lifted the lid, rummaged around and then hoisted up the radio. My stomach dropped. Rick glared at me.

"You. Now. Follow me."

He marched me double-quick to the Administration Building. Mr. Granger, the Head of Camp, with whom I had never before spoken, asked Rick what was the matter. Rick told him that the three of us needed to speak. Looking puzzled, Mr. Granger waved us into his office. A tall man, he had bristling eyebrows and tufts of grey hair sticking out of his ears. They fascinated me. He motioned Rick and me to chairs in front of a massive desk covered with neat piles of paper. The only furniture other than the desk were the two chairs and three wooden filing cabinets that

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

must've been there since the camp first opened for business. Photos of camp life crammed the walls. A painting of a soaring eagle hung behind the desk. Rick explained why we were there. Mr. Granger looked at me as if I were a slug.

"A camper accused of stealing? My God! Never before in the history of the camp has this happened. Maybe at other camps, but not Eagle's Nest.

"He then fired questions at me like a machine gun. I would've preferred the machine gun.

"Did you steal the radio?"

"No s-s-sir, I..."

"Then how did it get in your storage box?"

"I d-d-don't..."

"Are you accusing another camper?"

"No sir, but I ... I..."

"So you maintain your innocence?"

"Y-Y-Yes sir."

"Very well, we shall give you a chance to prove it."

"T-T-Thank you, sir. I will ... I mean I shall. I'm not sure why I thought correct grammar would help my case. Mr. Granger and Rick clearly thought I was guilty as sin. *What total bullshit*, Phil snarled when I told him.

"It'll be fine. I didn't do it."

"I still couldn't help crying. I went off to the woods so no one could see me. The 'chance to prove it' turned out to be a trial after dinner in front of the whole camp. Rick was assigned as my defense attorney. Some defense attorney since he already believed me guilty. Brad, another counselor, served as prosecutor and Mr. Granger acted as judge. Six campers were jurors. After dinner, Rick led me to a chair in the center of the stage. Mr. Granger sat to my left, the jurors to my right. Rick and Brad sat next to Mr. Granger. I faced the camp, frightened beyond belief. I can see it as if it were yesterday although it happened over thirty years ago."

"Didn't you realize how nuts this was?" she burst in. "Didn't anyone except Phil?"

"I guess not. My only thought was that I would be sent home. How would I face my parents?"

"Did you figure out who planted the radio in your storage box? Was it just another way to torment you?"

"Hang on. You'll find out." He took another cookie. "These could become habit forming."

"Comfort foods generally are. That's what makes them so good for you."

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

"Cute." He chuckled. "I spent a few minutes before dinner explaining to Rick where I had been that afternoon and vehemently denying that I had stolen the radio. The older campers leered at me during dinner. I wanted to sink into the ground. No one at my table spoke to me. Mr. Granger began the trial by reading the charge out loud and then having Brad and Rick make brief statements. Brad argued that finding the radio in my storage box virtually proved my guilt but that he would present other, supporting evidence. To my horror, Rick merely stated that I was claiming to be innocent. He couldn't imagine any Eagle's Nest camper being a thief, but one never knew."

"He should've met my lawyer."

"Then they started on witnesses. Brad called Will Roth, who said the radio had been on his bureau at lunch time. Another camper testified to seeing me enter the cabin just before free time. Tommy dealt the cruelest blow. He said he had seen me leave the cabin – apparently a few minutes after the other boy had seen me enter – with a grin on my face. He claimed to have said hi but I didn't respond. He was curious so he went into the cabin. No one was there and everything seemed okay so he went about his business. Finally, another kid from Moose testified that I had frequently admired Will's radio and commented that it would be grand to have one. I jumped up and shouted: *That's not true.*

"Mr. Granger laid into me. *The defendant will resume his seat and refrain from further outbursts or be held in contempt of court.*"

"Did he think he was on TV?" she asked.

"You'll find out."

"Okay. Sorry."

"Rick did me no favors with his cross-examinations. When it came to my defense, he called Phil – who had pleaded with him - to testify to my character. But his questions put me in an even worse position. He asked, for example, if I was happy at Eagle's Nest; and Phil being Phil told the truth. Phil started to make a statement about me, but Mr. Granger cut him off.

"I testified on my own behalf. Rick asked me whether I had been in the cabin just before free time, at least giving me the chance to say no, that I had walked down to the lake and then gone to work on the set. But then he asked if anyone had seen me at the lake, and I couldn't answer. Brad then grilled me much as Mr. Granger had earlier. He wanted to know if I made a practice of stealing and lying. In tears, I said no.

"Are you accusing your fellow campers of lying?"

"They must be mistaken.

"So how did the radio get into your storage box? By itself?"

"Everyone laughed.

"In his summation, Brad claimed the evidence was compelling. Rick said it might look bad but did not prove my guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. I could no longer make sense of things. I fought back my tears. The jury retired to the recreation room and came back in a couple of min-

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

utes. Their expressions terrified me. Sure enough, they found me guilty. Mr. Granger ordered me to stand. I could only think of what my parents would say. Of all that money gone down the drain. Mr. Granger approached me, a stern look on his hawkish face. I remember him towering over me as he said, in a voice full of righteous anger:

"The Defendant, having been found guilty as charged, is hereby sentenced to three cheers from the entire camp for being a good sport."

"At that, everyone rose to their feet – yelling, cheering, whistling and clapping."

Neither of them said a word. They looked at the stove. Jethro stirred but didn't get up. The afternoon light began to fade. After a few minutes, she said:

"So it was all a sick joke?"

"Exactly although I didn't grasp it at first. When I did, I still couldn't stop crying. They did it every year to a new camper. Highlight of the summer. The older campers looked forward to it and kept absolute secrecy. Several of my cabin-mates came on stage and clapped me on the back. I stopped crying and stood there trembling. I didn't know if I could walk. Tommy said I was cool. I smiled but felt hollow inside. The kids treated me better after the trial. I joked about it but felt weird. What had I done?"

"The sadistic bastards," she said. "It's a wonder your family didn't sue – or did they?"

"I've never told a soul until now."

"Really?"

"I felt so ashamed."

"Ashamed?"

"That they chose me."

"Would it have been okay, then, had they chosen someone else – Phil say?"

"No, of course not," he snapped. "To this day, I get a little crazy if I hear of someone being falsely accused. And if it happens to me ... even for something petty, I can't control my rage."

"I shouldn't have said that."

"Damned straight."

"Hey, lay off. I'm sorry. It must've hurt a lot."

"More than anything else that's ever happened to me."

"More than your divorce?"

"Does that surprise you?"

"The way you talked about your divorce..."

He got to his feet.

"When kids get hurt, it can last a lifetime."

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

She stood up.

"You think I don't know that?"

"So why did you imply...?"

"I didn't imply any damn thing," she said in a harsh voice.

Jethro got to his feet and growled. They didn't notice so intent were they on each other. He took a step towards her. The stove glowed, but the room had grown dark.

"You know," he said, "You're not always as damn clever as you think you are."

"Yeah: and you are?"

They stopped and stared at each other. Suddenly, he laughed and, putting an arm around her neck, pulled her face down to meet his upturned lips. She leaned into the kiss and took him in her arms. She pressed her tongue against his lips. He backed towards the sofa and sat down, guiding her gently down next to him. They continued to kiss. He started to slide off her sweater, and she raised her arms to help. He unbuttoned her shirt, unfastened her bra and caressed the deep mounds of her breasts. Her nipples hardened.

He lost track of time and thought only of the solid feel of her arms around him and the slightly sour, whiskey taste of her mouth. Night enfolded the house in an icy embrace, but the room stayed warm. Stroking his cheek, she disentangled herself and put as many logs in the stove as it could hold. She took his hand and walked towards the stairs. She lit two candles in her bedroom; and in their scant light, he made out two of her landscapes. A photo of Emma stood on a waist-high, cherry bureau. A rocking chair, a bed with an antique brass bedstead and a bedside table made up the rest of the furnishings. She had stacked a pile of books neatly on the table. He sat on the edge of the bed and watched her undress. Not a trace of sensuality in the long underwear and panties that dropped to the floor, but he felt a keen sense of anticipation – a feeling he had not experienced in a long time. Naked and towering over him, she said with only a hint of a smile:

"Your turn."

He took his time and she watched every garment hit the floor. A barely audible, "Oh", escaped her lips when he removed the last article. He pulled back the quilt and slid between the dark blue flannel sheets. As she lowered herself next to him, he thought how large and pendulous her breasts were and how much he liked them.

"I haven't done this in eleven years," she said, "and I'm scared." She paused. "No, I'm terrified."

"It's been a long time for me as well; but if we both act like we're not frightened, maybe we won't be."

Some time later, as she drifted off to sleep, she murmured: "So that's what they teach Deputy Senior Credit Officers."

"About the same as they teach veterinary assistants."

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

They slept tightly wrapped in each other's arms. When they woke an hour later, she whispered: "Are you hungry?"

"Famished."

They dressed and went downstairs. The fire was burning very low, and he added a couple of logs. Checking on the pile, he said: "These might not last the night. I'll bring in some more."

"First, let's get the cooler."

They dragged in the cooler, which – bound tightly with bungee cords – they had put back in the snow after lunch. He carried in a half dozen armloads of wood while she fed Jethro. The shepherd had followed them upstairs but had soon departed for the stove.

"Polite dog, eh?" she had said.

She made sandwiches while he made a salad. She sniffed at a tall, plastic container of deli potato salad. "Unlikely to do us in before morning." He put the salad on the table, stepped up behind her, wrapped her in his arms and kissed the back of her neck.

"Do that much longer and the potato salad will go bad."

"It's just that you're so damn sexy."

"Oh, right. Rat's nest hair and all." She grinned. "But thank you."

Dinner resembled a quiz show.

He: "Do you go to church?"

She: "Only when God needs a dressing down."

She: "Do you sleep in pajamas?"

He: "What are pajamas?"

He: "Do you like movies?"

She: "Does a bear shit in the woods?"

He: "You're the one with the bears."

She: "Do you like rock?"

He: "For dancing."

She: "How awful was your marriage?"

He: "She didn't like rock music even for dancing."

She: "Be serious."

"Later," he said.

When they climbed, naked, into bed, she said: "It's later."

"One afternoon, we were in the midst of a heated discussion about the financial aspects of the divorce. I had already moved out, and we each had a lawyer; but I thought we could come to an agreement without running up the legal bills. So I had asked for the meeting. Her lawyer objected, but she agreed. We had been at it for over an hour and decided to go for a walk to clear the air. We hadn't gone far when she said:

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

"I suppose you'd like the rings back.

"The engagement ring, in particular, was quite nice: an emerald surrounded by diamond chips.

"They were gifts, not loans, I said.

"Well, I don't want them, so here.

"She proceeded to take them off and drop them in a nearby sewer drain."

"Oh, that awful."

They woke to the sound of plows clearing the road. The numbers on the digital clock-radio next to her bed glowed red. He gazed at them groggily and then shouted:

"The power's on."

"It came on around three," she said and kissed him.

"Does that mean I can take a shower?"

"We can both take a shower."

"Let's save water."

"You mean shower together?"

"Uh-huh."

"Sure," she said. "After all, we're in the midst of a drought."

He called AAA shortly after seven. After a long wait, the operator told him that Bud's Auto knew where his car was and would pull it out and tow it to the shop sometime between eleven and twelve. The harsh sun glistened on the carpet of snow like myriad diamonds. They drove through a solid white corridor broken only by occasional driveways. It felt like a tunnel of snow. They passed no other cars on her road. Snow drifts clogged the stream. Tree branches that had cracked from the weight stuck out of the snow banks like stick figures. A few cars crept like turtles along the Mercersburg Road. She slowed at the spot where he had slid off the road. He noted the heavy tread marks where Bud's truck had mashed down the snow and pulled out the BMW.

"Car's out," was all she said.

Neither spoke the rest of the way to Mercersburg. His car had suffered little damage other than the caved-in front door. Bud told him it was drivable but that AAA wouldn't reimburse him for his full costs.

"That's fine," he said, handing Bud his Visa card. "I'm just grateful to have the car back in operable condition."

He took his seat in the Jeep. She glanced at him and then looked straight ahead. In that brief look, he had seen the uncertainty. He didn't know what to say.

How about thank you?

"I can't..." he began.

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

"You don't have to thank me," she interrupted.

The silence felt as smothering as the blizzard. She turned to face him. His stomach knotted. She started to speak.

"Am I..." She stopped. She took a deep breath. He held his. "Am I ever going to see you again or did you just not want to sleep two nights in a row on the sofa?"

His heart soared. He laughed. She looked as if she were about to club him.

"How about next weekend?" he asked. "Perhaps you'd like to come to Wells City? See where I live?"

She guffawed.

"Will I have to sleep on the sofa?"

"No, but Jethro will."



Back at the office on Monday morning, he had little trouble – with all the tools of modern information systems at his disposal – finding her parents. Although he called it "short notice", his boss gave him a week off. At that time of year, getting the flights he needed was a piece of cake. He planned to be back on Thursday and before leaving, called her to confirm the arrangements for the weekend.

She arrived at his place Friday around eight. The weekend was exciting, fun and sensual. After making love for the third time, she said:

"Are we shooting for the World Series?"

They slept in on Saturday morning; and in the afternoon, he took her on a tour of the Brentwood Museum – named for a local auto parts manufacturer – with its small but perfectly respectable collection of Renaissance and Impressionist Art.

"I have to admit I've only been here once before," he said with a chagrined smile.

"It's amazing," she had gasped in astonishment. "I'm learning so much."

That night, they went to his favorite restaurant and, on Sunday morning, took a long walk on the path along the river. Jethro ran up and down the path and investigated the scents in the woods. A cheese omelet was brunch's centerpiece.

"And to think," she said. "I fixed you a burger."

"Love at first bite."

"Oh God!" she exclaimed.

"Rotten joke," he said. "I can be so stupid at times."

"I've heard worse," she said and kissed him. Early on Sunday after-

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

noon, however, she noticed that he seemed restless. "Have I overstayed my welcome?"

"Not at all, but I do have a few credits to review. How about I come to your place next weekend? We could hike in the woods – spot a few bears."

"Yes," she laughed. "Yes, yes, and yes again – especially the part about the bears."

After kissing good-bye – a long kiss with parted lips, he said: "Have a great week" and hugged her tightly.

She drove home elated – with Jethro asleep in the passenger seat; but she was puzzled – and a little worried – as she approached her house to see a car parked in the driveway. As she pulled in, a young woman got out whom she did not immediately recognize.